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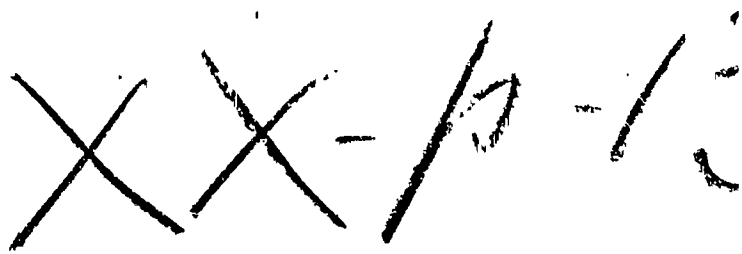
THE

ENGLISH AND FOREIGN

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EXTRA SERIES.

VOLUME II.





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Eva Lessing.

LESSING.

BY

JAMES SIME.

"Vormals, im Leben, ehrten wir dich als einen der Götter,
Nun, da du todt bist, herrscht über die Geister dein Geist."

GOETHE.

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IN TWO VOLUMES.

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LESSING.

CHAPTER XV.

"HAMBURGISCHE DRAMATURGIE."

I.

PROBABLY no one has ever assumed the position of a dramatic critic with a larger and more generous preparation for its duties than Lessing. He had not only written the best plays which then existed in German literature, but had from early youth, by the force of strong natural preference, diligently and patiently investigated the conditions imposed upon the dramatist by the relations of his work to the stage. Moreover, he had a profound knowledge of the dramatic literatures of Greece and Rome; and he was familiar with the masterpieces produced in England, France, Italy, and Spain. Even this did not exhaust the acquirements fitting him for his new functions, for the best dramatic criticism in all the languages known to him he had studied; and to Aristotle, above all, he had devoted days and nights of thoughtful and fruitful labour. It was, therefore, to be expected that his work would be rich both in abstract ideas and in practical suggestions; and the hopes of those who had formed the highest anticipations respecting it were not disappointed. Many of the articles are now, indeed, of little or no interest, for they are but

slight notices of unimportant plays;[1] but many dramas which have long been forgotten sometimes give occasion to deep and far-reaching discussion of the principles of dramatic art, while works which must permanently claim the attention of criticism are subjected to thorough and fearless inquiry. The later essays are of a much more learned character than those at the beginning of the series. This is partly explained by the fact that for a time, through his controversy with Klotz, Lessing could think of hardly anything which did not bear upon his antiquarian studies; and after the National Theatre was given up, there was no reason why he should not allow himself to approach his themes by the paths on which he was conscious of moving with the utmost freedom and delight.

It would be more useless in the case of the "Dramaturgie" than in that of "Laokoon" to attempt to show the exact course Lessing pursues, for here the arrangement is purely arbitrary, and there is scarce one of his principles which he is not obliged repeatedly to enforce. It will be better to fasten upon a few of the leading conceptions of the work, and to trace their influence upon individual criticisms. For an adequate idea of the strength of judgment, the depth of learning, and freshness and vigour of style displayed in the various discussions, it is absolutely necessary that the book itself should be consulted. In almost every article there is something to arrest attention and awaken curiosity. We may not agree with the writer, but we are interested by his bold and free handling of complicated themes; and he does not weary us even when presenting results of research that would in ordinary hands be intolerably tedious.

[1] The works which form the subject of Lessing's criticisms are minutely described in Materialien zu Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's Hamburgischer Dramaturgie. Zusammengestellt von Wilhelm Cosack (1876). Every allusion, however minute, in the "Dramaturgie" is explained in this work, which is evidently the result of much patient labour.

A similar task is undertaken in an edition of the "Dramaturgie," "für die oberste Klasse höherer Lehranstalten und den weiteren Kreis der Gebildeten," by Dr. F. Schröter and Dr. R. Thiele (1877).

Lessing had the secret of imparting life and charm to every subject he chose to touch.

Criticisms of this kind were absolutely unknown before his time. He was, therefore, at a loss what name to give them. At first he thought of calling them "Didaskalien," under the impression that the brief Greek notices thus named, of which Aristotle himself wrote some, were more than mere discussions of chronology. At last he adopted, in a German form, the title "Dramaturgia"—given by Lione Alacci, in the beginning of the seventeenth century, to a work containing an alphabetical list of all dramatic works that had appeared up to that time. "The title 'Hamburgische Didaskalien,'" he says in the concluding paper, "sounded too foreign to me, and now I am very glad that I preferred 'Dramaturgie.' What I should include or not include in a 'Dramaturgie' depended upon myself; at least, Lione Alacci had nothing to prescribe to me. But scholars think they know what a 'Didaskalie' must be like, even if their idea is derived only from those respecting Terence, which Casaubon calls *breviter et eleganter scriptas.* I desired to make my 'Didaskalien' neither so brief nor so elegant; and our living Casaubons would have shaken their heads when they found how seldom I referred to any chronological circumstance which in future, if millions of other books were lost, might throw a little light upon some historical fact. In what year of Louis XIV. or Louis XV., whether in Paris or in Versailles, whether in presence of princes of the blood or not in presence of princes of the blood, this or that French masterpiece was first represented: for this they would have sought, and to their great astonishment they would not have found it."[1]

II.

The leading principle of "Laokoon" led to the doctrine that the drama is the highest species of poetry. In one

[1] Sämmtliche Schriften, vii. p. 418.

sense, therefore, the "Dramaturgie" may be regarded as an informal continuation of "Laokoon." Lessing's position in the earlier work is, however, essentially different from that which he occupies in the later. In the discussions of "Laokoon" he had predecessors, but none who could claim absolute authority; everywhere we find him testing opinions, and advancing slowly to his conclusions as the result of individual reflection and research. But the laws applicable to the drama had not, he believed, to be discovered; they had been once for all set forth in the "Poetics" of Aristotle. Hence Aristotle is the ruling power in the "Dramaturgie;" it is his doctrine which is expounded, defended, and applied. Lessing, of course, puts it in the manner adapted to his own culture and the needs of his own time; but essentially it is unchanged in his pages.

"I do not," he says of the "Poetics,"[1] "hesitate to confess (even if I should be laughed at for doing so in these enlightened times!) that I deem it as infallible a work as the Elements of Euclid. Its principles are as true and certain, only not so easily comprehended, and therefore more open to dispute." He even asserts that tragedy "cannot take a step from the theory indicated by Aristotle without going precisely so far from perfection." It would be a profound mistake to suppose that this estimate was in any degree due to the influence of a great name, for no modern thinker can be mentioned less likely to be impressed by mere fame. His own right to think and speak he asserted with manly confidence, no matter what writer he found himself contradicting. "I should soon," he explains,[2] "be rid of the opinion of Aristotle if I could only be rid of his reasons also." The cause of his deep faith in the "Poetics" was that its laws are based upon a study of the masterpieces of the Greek drama. These masterpieces seemed to him, of all dramatic works, the nearest to perfection. He considered it, therefore, incredible that the critical doctrine

[1] S. S. vii. p. 420. [2] S. S. vii. p. 310.

drawn from them should not be the sole critical doctrine for all time.

So profound was his reverence for the "Poetics" that he long intended to write a complete commentary on it. He did not find time to do so; but fortunately the substance of what he had to say is preserved for us in the "Dramaturgie."[1]

As the drama is the highest species of poetry, so of the dramatic art itself the highest species is tragedy. Here the poet probes deepest into the secrets of human nature and rises to its loftiest summits. It is, therefore, to tragedy that Lessing chiefly directs his attention.

In discussing its nature he follows the famous definition in the sixth chapter of the "Poetics:"[2] a definition about which there have been nearly as many opinions as there have been translators and expositors. In Lessing's time the prevalent conception of the theory set forth in the definition was something as follows: The supreme aim of tragedy is to purify the passions; and it attains this end by means of an action exciting pity and terror, the objects of both these emotions being the persons carrying on the action. It is not necessary that both should be excited in the same play. In one play the leading character may be an object of terror alone; in another, of pity alone. As regards the effect of tragedy (*κάθαρσις*), it is of a purely moral nature. We see on the stage certain passions leading to disaster and sorrow; love, jealousy, anger, ambition, brought into too violent exercise, end in

[1] For a careful and scholarlike estimate of the influence of Aristotle upon Lessing, see Lessing's Aristotelische Studien und der Einfluss derselben auf seine Werke. Dargestellt von Dr. Emil Gotschlich (1876).

[2] "Εστιν οὖν τραγῳδία μίμησις πράξεως σπουδαίας καὶ τελείας, μέγεθος ἐχούσης, ἡδυσμένῳ λόγῳ, χωρὶς ἑκάστου τῶν εἰδῶν ἐν τοῖς μορίοις, δρώντων καὶ οὐ δι' ἀπαγγελίας, δι' ἐλέου καὶ φόβου περαίνουσα τὴν τῶν τοιούτων παθημάτων κάθαρσιν."

Tragedy, therefore, is an imitation of a serious and perfect action, having magnitude, in pleasing language, the several species (metre and song) being distributed separately in the parts (dialogue and chorus), by men acting and not by narration, effecting by pity and fear the purging of such passions.

tragic consequences. We are, therefore, put upon our guard against the extravagance of passion, and taught the necessity of moderation and self-control.

This view of Aristotle's theory, which was due mainly to Corneille, Lessing opposes at every point. In the first place, he insists on the correction which, as we have seen, he had made years before in a letter to Nicolai: that the true translation of φόβος is not terror but fear. Lessing was not the first to translate the word thus; but he was the first to show the importance of the rendering, which is undoubtedly essential to a true understanding of Aristotle's meaning. Next, he denied that the fear associated with pity is fear for the persons on the stage, since fear for them *is* pity, and Aristotle cannot be supposed to have expressed the same thing by means of two different words. What, then, is the fear which, according to Aristotle, tragedy must excite? In answering this question, Lessing asserts a principle which has since been of the highest value in the interpretation of the Greek philosopher. "Aristotle must everywhere be explained from himself. Any one who wishes to give us a new commentary on his 'Poetics,' and to leave that of Dacier far behind, I should advise before all things to read the works of the philosopher from beginning to end. He will find explanations for the 'Poetics' where he least expected them; especially he must study the 'Rhetoric' and the 'Ethics.' One naturally supposes that the scholastic philosophers, who had the writings of Aristotle at their finger-ends, must long ago have discovered these explanations. But the 'Poetics' was precisely that one of his writings about which they least troubled themselves. Besides, they were wanting in other knowledge, without which these explanations could not be fruitful; they did not know the theatre and its masterpieces." [1]

In accordance with this principle Lessing turns for the explanation both of fear and pity to the fifth and eighth

[1] S. S. vii. p. 315.

chapters of the second book of the "Rhetoric." "Everything depends upon the idea which Aristotle formed to himself of pity. He believed that the evil which is to be the subject of pity must necessarily be of such a kind that we have reason to fear it may occur to ourselves or to those dear to us. Where this fear does not exist there cannot be pity, for neither he (says Aristotle) whom misfortune has so deeply depressed that he has nothing more to dread, nor he who believes himself so perfectly happy that he cannot conceive how a misfortune could befall him—neither the despairing nor the over-confident—is accustomed to pity others. Hence he explains that which excites fear and that which excites pity, the one by the other. Everything, he says, is fearful to us which, if it happened or were about to happen to another, should awaken pity; everything is pitiful which we should fear if it threatened ourselves. It is not enough, therefore, in the opinion of Aristotle, that the unfortunate person whom we are to pity should be undeserving of his misfortune, although it may be occasioned by some weakness on his part: his tormented innocence, or rather his too heavily punished guilt, is lost to us, is unable to excite our pity, if we do not see a possibility that his sorrow may also strike us. This possibility, however, is felt, and may become a great probability, if the poet does not make him worse than we are accustomed to be, if he makes him think and act precisely as we should do in his circumstances, or believe that we should do; in short, if he makes him exactly like ourselves. From this resemblance arises the fear that our fate may easily become as like his as we feel ourselves to be like himself; and this fear it is that at once perfects pity."[1]

The fear, then, of which Aristotle speaks is not fear for others; it is fear for ourselves. Lessing does not represent him as maintaining that pity is altogether impossible without such fear. Out of mere humanity we may pity

[1] S. S. vii. p. 316.

one who is suffering what can never affect ourselves; and that kind of pity Aristotle calls philanthropy. Our pity, however, becomes intense, it becomes a passion, only when accompanied by fear; then only it is adapted for the purposes of tragedy.

But if this is correct, why should Aristotle have mentioned fear at all? Is it not already implied in the pity to which alone he refers? "I answer," says Lessing, "if Aristotle had merely wished to teach us what passions tragedy can and ought to excite, he might, indeed, have refrained from mentioning fear, and would without doubt have done so, for never was a philosopher more sparing of words than he. But he wished at the same time to teach us what passions should be purified in us by those excited in tragedy; and with this in view he was obliged to make special mention of fear. For although, according to him, the passion of pity cannot, either in or out of the theatre, exist without fear for ourselves; although fear is a necessary ingredient of pity: the reverse is not true; pity for others is not a necessary ingredient of fear for ourselves. So soon as the tragedy is over our pity ceases, and of all the impulses experienced by us, nothing remains except the probable fear for ourselves which the pitied misfortune has created. This we take with us; and as it helped, as an ingredient of pity, to purify pity, so now, as an enduring passion, it helps to purify itself. Consequently, to show that it can do and really does this, Aristotle deemed it necessary to mention it."[1]

This, however, is a very forced interpretation; nor are we bound to accept it by assenting to the view Lessing sets forth as to the relations of fear and pity. It is quite true that we do not feel pity in its most intense form unless the evil which appeals to us is one we ourselves may experience; but in the moment of pity fear does not necessarily rise into consciousness. The purest pity is that which we feel without any direct, conscious reference to ourselves.

[1] S. S. vii. p. 323.

The more probable theory of Aristotle's meaning, then, is, not that pity and fear must be excited together as elements of a single intense emotion, but that they are aroused one after the other. He plainly intends to say that both shall be stirred in every tragedy, but as two distinct passions.

With regard to the effect attributed by Aristotle to tragedy (*κάθαρσις*), Lessing so far agrees with Corneille that he considers it of an ethical character. He cannot, indeed, conceive that there is any form of art which can be wholly dissociated from moral influence. "All forms of poetry ought to improve us; it is deplorable that we should have to prove this, still more deplorable that there are poets who doubt it." It must not be supposed that this means that a poet is to be a preacher in disguise. So shallow a theory Lessing was incapable of holding; and on one occasion, in treating of the appearance of the ghost in "Semiramis," he goes out of his way to protest against the notion that a drama must be built up in order to illustrate a maxim. We have seen that in his "Discussions" on the fable the distinction he drew between the action in the latter and the action in the epic and drama was this: that that which gives unity to the action of the fable is the truth it is designed to enforce, while the action of the drama and the epic must be complete in itself. This principle he restates in the "Dramaturgie." What he means in claiming for poetry a moral influence is, that the feelings which it awakens, and which alone form the poet's immediate object, favourably affect character. Ethical improvement, in short, is in the nature of things associated with æsthetic pleasure.

The crude view developed by Corneille he altogether rejects. Assuming that the word "purification" adequately represents *κάθαρσις*, he points out that Aristotle does not say "the purification of the passions," but the "purification of such passions:" that is, the purification of fear and pity themselves, and of feelings closely allied to them. Aristotle's theory of virtue is, that it is the mean between two

extremes; hence, Lessing argues, his doctrine respecting tragedy must be that it is designed to deliver us alike from the excess and the defect both of pity and fear. "As this purification consists of nothing else than the transformation of the passions into virtuous dispositions, and as every virtue, according to our philosopher, lies between two extremes, tragedy must, if it is to transform our pity into virtue, be able to purify us from both extremes of pity: which is also to be understood of fear. Tragic pity must, in reference to pity, purify the soul not only of him who feels too much, but of him who feels too little. Tragic fear must, in reference to fear, purify the soul not only of him who fears no misfortune, but of him who is made anxious by every misfortune, even the most remote and improbable. In like manner tragic pity must, in reference to fear, check excess in either direction; as tragic fear must do in reference to pity." [1]

Although Lessing here mentions only fear and pity, he of course implies a reference to feelings closely allied to them. It is, however, probable that Aristotle meant only fear and pity themselves. By "such passions" he can hardly be understood to indicate more than the passions he has just named.

That the provinces of art and morality are wholly distinct is one of the fundamental doctrines of modern criticism; and since Lessing held that in the first instance the artist must think only of the feelings his work is to excite, he was not so far away from this principle as has often been assumed. He was, however, mistaken in supposing that Aristotle alluded in any form whatever in his definition to the moral influence of tragedy. There is nothing in the "Poetics" which implies that the *κάθαρσις* is a process of an ethical nature; his whole theory of art leads to a directly contrary conclusion. But if, advancing from this negative position, we ask what the *κάθαρσις* is, it is by no means easy to give a satisfac-

[1] S. S. vii. p. 327.

tory answer. The question has been much debated in Germany since Lessing's time; and scholars are still far from having agreed upon any single theory.

The view of Goethe was that "tragedy, after a course of pity and fear, concludes its business in the theatre by the balancing of such passions." He believed that Aristotle meant only that "harmonious rounding off which is demanded of every drama, of all poetical works." In 1858 Jacob Bernays published an essay on the subject, around which a very considerable literature has since grown up. For the true idea of *κάθαρσις* he goes to the seventh chapter of the eighth book of the "Politics," where Aristotle uses the term in speaking of the influence of music. Lessing had already referred to this passage, but had derived from it no light. Bernays considers that the idea implied in the word is originally a medical one; that *κάθαρσις* is simply "a removal or softening of sickness, effected by medically relieving means." He draws a sharp distinction between *πάθος* and *πάθημα*. The former is a passion which quickly comes and goes; the latter an enduring state of mind, a state of mind always more or less inclined to particular passions. Those who profit chiefly by tragedy are persons who suffer from a tendency to the excess of pity and fear. By the vivid excitement of these feelings they are for the time freed from the burden, and restored to cheerfulness and self-control.

It is doubtful whether the distinction between *πάθος* and *πάθημα* can be maintained; but even if it could, how seldom any one enters a theatre with a desire for deliverance from any such load! Moreover, is it true that the vivid excitement of fear and pity even temporarily delivers us from the tendency to them? Certainly not, if there is some particular person whom we have occasion to pity, some particular danger we have occasion to fear; and as regards the general lot of man, tragedy assuredly does not tend to make us think of that with light hearts.

Perhaps we shall come nearest the truth by following

out Lessing's hint that the *κάθαρσις* of Aristotle means our deliverance both from the excess and the defect of pity and fear. Lessing was only wrong in supposing that this was to be a permanent deliverance, or at any rate a deliverance going on after we have seen the tragedy which is to occasion it. Aristotle is clearly thinking only of what goes on during the performance. According to this view, the passions of fear and pity are not purged away; they are merely themselves purged of every element that tends to prevent full enjoyment. We see a mind struggling with awful agencies; our pity is stirred, and if left to itself it will become too powerful for pleasure. But we are reminded that we too are exposed to similar ills; the remembrance causes us to experience fear, and fear deprives us of the power to give pity its utmost scope. Fear itself threatens to overwhelm us, but in its turn it is checked by pity. While each directly restrains the other, indirectly pity stimulates fear, and fear stimulates pity, by maintaining the temper which inclines us to both emotions. Thus, while the tragedy lasts, if it is a tragedy wrought according to the true laws of art, the balance is so far maintained that we are able to derive from the poet's vision the highest delight it is able to impart to us.[1]

In his correspondence with Mendelssohn and Nicolai, although admitting that the tragic hero should have some slight fault which occasions his misfortunes, Lessing, as we have seen, maintained that in other respects he could not be too perfect, since our pity is deep in proportion not only to the sufferings but to the goodness of its object. He now says nothing on the latter point, but is emphatic in supporting Aristotle's doctrine that misfortune should not overtake the perfectly innocent. "The thought that

[1] Cf. Baumgart's "Aristoteles, Lessing, und Goethe," (1877). Among other scholars who have treated the question may be named Susemihl, Döring, and Ueberweg. The latter, while agreeing in the main with Bernays, represents *κάθαρσις* as a temporary deliverance, not from a permanent affection, but from the passions of pity and fear themselves. But no essential difficulty is removed by this modification of the theory.

men can be unhappy without any fault of their own is in itself hateful. Even pagans sought to remove this hateful thought as far from themselves as possible; and shall we nourish it? shall we take delight in plays that strengthen it? We? whom religion and reason should have convinced that it is as unjust as it is blasphemous?" Not less heartily does he agree with Aristotle in excluding utterly depraved characters from tragedy.

III.

The play which gives occasion to the most elaborate exposition of the views now set forth is a tragedy entitled "Richard III.," by his old friend Weisse. He frankly acknowledges that it has considerable poetical merits; but that it is in any true sense a tragedy he will not allow, and for this reason: it represents a ruffian so bad that it is impossible to be affected by his downfall. "He is so detestable a villain, so incarnate a devil, in whom we find not a single trait in common with ourselves, that I believe we could see him given over before our eyes to the pains of hell without in the least degree feeling for him, without in the least fearing that if such a penalty follows only such crimes it awaits us also. And what is the misfortune, the penalty, which in the end strikes him? After so many misdeeds, which we are compelled to observe, we hear that he has died sword in hand. When this is related to the Queen the poet makes her say, 'That is something!' I have never been able to refrain from saying to myself after her, 'No, that is nothing!' To how many a good king has not this happened in maintaining his crown against a powerful rebel? Richard dies like a man upon the bed of honour. And shall such a death compensate me for the indignation I have felt throughout the whole piece at the triumph of his villanies? 'You have come off cheaply,' I think to myself; 'but it is well there is another justice besides that of the poet!'"

In answer to the objection that although Richard himself does not excite pity his victims do, Lessing says: "Yes, but what a strange, harsh feeling is mixed with my pity for these persons!—a feeling which so acts, that I should wish to be spared this pity. I do not wish that in the case of real tragic pity: I linger gladly over it, and thank the poet for so sweet a sorrow. Aristotle speaks of a certain *μιαρόν*, a hateful feeling we experience at the misfortune of good, perfectly innocent persons. And are not the Queen, Elizabeth, the Princes, altogether such persons? What have they done? By what have they brought themselves into the clutches of this beast? Is it their fault that they have a better right to the throne than he? Especially the little weeping victims who can scarce distinguish their right hand from their left! Who will deny that they deserve our whole sorrow? But is this sorrow, which makes me think with shuddering of the fate of men, which incites to murmuring against Providence, and distinctly suggests despair—I will not ask pity?—be it called what it may—but is it that which an imitative art ought to awaken?"

'But these things have really happened.' "They have really happened?" retorts Lessing. "Be it so: there will, then, be a good reason for them in the eternal, infinite connection of all things. Here there may be wisdom and goodness in that which, in the few members the poet detaches, appears blind destiny and horror. From these few members he ought to make a whole which is completely rounded within itself, in which one thing is completely explained by another, in which no difficulty arises whose solution must be sought outside his scheme in the general plan of things. The whole produced by the mortal creator should be a shadow of the whole of the Eternal Creator; should accustom us to the thought that as in the former everything is solved for the best, so it will be in the latter. And he so far forgets this his noblest vocation as to weave the inconceivable ways of Pro-

vidence into his own little circle, and deliberately to stir our horror at them? O spare us this, ye who have our hearts in your power! To what end this melancholy feeling? To teach us submission? Cold reason can teach us that; and if the teaching of reason is to cling to us, and in our subjection we are still to maintain trust and joyful courage, it is in the highest degree necessary that we should be reminded as little as possible of the confusing examples of such undeserved, horrible fates. Away with them from the stage! If it were possible, away with them from all books!" [1]

The rejection of Weisse's play, had the principles adopted by Lessing led to no other result, would have caused little remark; but he drove them to consequences of far wider scope. In virtue of them he condemned the whole classic drama of France. Corneille, although he imagined himself to be in complete accordance with Aristotle's laws, altogether violated their spirit. In one class of his plays, as in "Polyeucte," he excites pity without fear by involving spotless characters in ruin; in another, as in "Rodogune," he excites fear, or rather terror, without pity, by displaying monsters of wickedness in full activity, and, after all, bringing upon them no severer punishment than death. His successors built on the basis he had laid; and as Lessing supposed that the foundation was swept away, he considered that the whole structure necessarily tumbled into ruins.

"It is well known how eager the Greek and Roman peoples were with their theatre; especially the latter, with tragedy. How indifferent, how cold, on the contrary, are our people in regard to the theatre! Whence this difference if it does not arise from the fact that the Greeks were before their stage filled with such strong, such extraordinary feelings that they could scarce await the moment for experiencing them again and again; and that we are conscious of such weak impressions before our stage that we seldom

[1] S. S. vii. p. 332.

think it worth the time and money to secure them? We go to the theatre, almost all, almost always, from curiosity, from custom, from ennui, from a desire for society, from a wish to stare and be stared at; and only a few, and that few seldom, from other motives. I say we, our people, our stage; I do not mean, however, only the Germans. We Germans confess sincerely enough that as yet we have no theatre. What many of our critics who agree with this confession and are great admirers of the French theatre think of the matter, I know not; but I know what I myself think. I think that not only we Germans but also that those who for a century have boasted of having a theatre, the best theatre in all Europe—that even the French have no theatre. No tragedy, certainly! For the impression which French tragedy produces is so shallow, so cold!"[1]

No one who has in the least degree studied Lessing's character will suppose that national prejudice had anything to do with this sweeping judgment. "Do I, then, mean," he asks, "that no Frenchman is capable of producing a really moving tragical work? that the volatile spirit of the nation is incapable of such labour? I should be ashamed of myself if that ever occurred to me. Germany has not yet made itself ridiculous through a Bouhours.[2] And I for my part have little inclination to imitate him. For I am thoroughly convinced that no people in the world has received any gift of the mind higher than others. We say, indeed: the thoughtful Englishman, the witty Frenchman. But who, then, has made this division? Certainly not nature, which distributes everything among all alike. There are as many witty Englishmen as witty Frenchmen; as many thoughtful Frenchmen as thoughtful Englishmen: the mass of the people are neither the one nor the other. What, then, do I mean?

[1] S. S. vii. p. 335.

[2] Bouhours, in a work entitled "Manière de bien penser sur les ouvrages d'esprit" (1684), gravely inquired whether it was possible for a German to have "esprit."

I mean that what the French might very well have they do not yet possess: true tragedy. And why do they not possess it? Because they long ago believed that they possessed it. And in this belief they are confirmed by something they do really have more than all other peoples —but it is no gift of nature—their vanity. It happens to nations as to individuals. Gottsched (it will be easy to understand why I think of him here) passed in his youth for a poet, because then the verse-maker was not yet distinguished from the poet. Philosophy and criticism gradually brought this distinction to light; and if Gottsched had been willing to advance with his century, if his opinions and taste had been widened and purified with those of his age, he might really have become instead of a verse-maker a poet. But as he had already and often heard himself called a poet, as his vanity had persuaded him that he was one, he continued as he began. He could not possibly attain what he believed he already possessed; and the older he became the more obstinate and shameless was he in maintaining that he had this imaginary possession. Exactly so, it seems to me, has it been with the French. Corneille had scarce snatched their theatre a little from barbarism when they believed it was already near perfection. Racine appeared to them to put the finishing touches to it; and thereafter it was no more a question (as, indeed, it had never really been) whether the tragic poet might not be still more pathetic, still more moving than Corneille and Racine. This was accepted as impossible, and all the efforts of later poets were necessarily limited to this, to become as like as possible to the one or the other. For a century they have deceived themselves and to some extent their neighbours; but let any one go and say that to them, and see what they will answer! Of the two it is Corneille who has done most harm, and has exercised upon their tragic poets the most injurious influence. For Racine has misled them only by his example; Corneille, however, by his

examples and doctrines together. The latter especially, accepted by the whole nation (with the exception of a pedant or two, a Hedelin, a Dacier, who, however, often did not know what they were driving at) as oracular utterances, acted upon by all later poets, could not—I dare to prove it piece by piece—lead to anything but the baldest, dullest, most untragical stuff." [1]

"I venture," he exclaims, in the last article of the "Dramaturgie," [2] "to make an offer here, let people take it as they will! Name to me the work of the great Corneille which I should not improve. What shall be the wager? Yet no! I should not like this offer to be taken for boasting. Let it, then, be noted what I add: I shall certainly make it better, and yet be far from being a Corneille, and yet be far from having made a masterpiece. I shall certainly make it better, and yet flatter myself little on that account. I shall have done nothing except what every one could do who believes in Aristotle as firmly as I."

Where, then, shall we find the true, the Aristotelian laws of tragedy exemplified? The answer is implied in the following:—"I know several French pieces which bring to light thoroughly well the unhappy consequences of a passion; from which one may draw very good doctrines with respect to this passion. But I know none which have aroused my pity in the degree in which tragedy ought to arouse it, in which I assuredly know, from various Greek and English pieces, that it can arouse it. Various French tragedies are very fine, very instructive works, which I hold worthy of all praise; only, they are not tragedies. Their authors could not be other than clever men; some of them deserve no mean rank among poets: but they are not tragical poets; their Corneille and Racine, their Crebillon and Voltaire, have little or nothing of that which makes Sophokles, Euripides, and Shakespeare what they are." [3]

The Greek tragic poets and Shakespeare: these, accord-

[1] S. S. vii. p. 339. [2] S. S. vii. p. 422. [3] S. S. vii. p. 342.

ing to Lessing, are the sole writers who breathe to the full extent the spirit of the laws of Aristotle. From the former these laws were deduced; from the latter they might be deduced in substance if not in form. If the Germans were ever to possess a tragic stage, their first duty was to turn their eyes away from the age of Louis XIV., and gaze steadily at the periods of Perikles and Elizabeth. Yet Shakespeare was no more to be directly imitated than Corneille. "What has been said of Homer," says Lessing,[1] "that it would be as hard to take a verse from him as to take his club from Hercules, is perfectly true also of Shakespeare. Upon the smallest of his beauties a stamp is impressed which calls to the whole world, 'I am Shakespeare's!' And woe to the beauty of any one else which has the audacity to place itself beside his! Shakespeare must be studied, not plundered. If we have genius, Shakespeare must be to us what the camera obscura is to the landscape painter; he looks diligently into it to learn how nature is projected in all cases upon a flat surface, but he borrows nothing from it."

IV.

There can be no doubt that if we judge the classic drama of France by Aristotle's theory of tragedy, we shall be compelled with Lessing to reject it. Both Corneille and Racine, with all their anxiety to be as nearly as possible true to the mere form of his doctrine, are untrue to its spirit. Must we, therefore, strike these two names off the list of tragic poets? In other words, does Aristotle's theory cover the whole ground? Is there no tragedy possible except such tragedies as would have received his approval?

We may be well content, in answering these questions, to take Shakespeare for our guide. If we turn to him, we find that several of his tragedies, so far as the strongest

[1] S.S. vii. p. 308.

feelings they awaken are concerned, are in full accordance with Aristotelian doctrine. The three works in which his genius touches its loftiest ideal—"King Lear," "Othello," and "Hamlet"—produce a depth and richness of impression which were far beyond the resources of ancient art; but in kind the impression is to a large extent the same as that effected by Æschylus, Sophokles, and Euripides, when their achievement is grandest and most noble. The heart is filled with pity in the contemplation of spirits charged with such splendid life brought to utter woe; and pity is inevitably associated with fear. It is true we have no dread of being struck down by the ingratitude by which the soul of Lear is cleft; nor do we fear the particular forms of misery which fall to the lot of Hamlet and Othello. But their fate, as by a flash of lightning, reveals the dark possibilities which underlie the smiling aspects of existence. We are vividly reminded that we are placed in the midst of awful forces which we but dimly comprehend and can only slightly control, and that we too may be one day exposed to their action.

The leading characters of these plays, in harmony with the law laid down by Aristotle and Lessing, partly occasion their own misfortunes. It is impossible, however, to justify this on the ground suggested by Aristotle and stated with great vigour by Lessing: that the spectacle of woe befalling a perfectly innocent person causes discontent with the moral government of the world. If this argument were well-founded, it would be necessary that the hero of a tragedy should to the full deserve his fate: in which case, according to Aristotle's theory, he would cease to be a true hero of tragedy, since he could not then be the object of tragic pity. The real reason why certain weaknesses are attributed to these characters is that without them the tragedy could not take place. If Lear were of less fiery temper he would not put himself into the power of the monsters who ruin him; a less passionate and impulsive Othello would not accept

as sufficient the evidence of his wife's guilt; a Hamlet of stronger will, more inclined to act than to contemplate action from a distance in an ideal world of his own, would not so long delay the execution of the mission with which he believes himself charged. It is the slight defect in the constitution of each nature that makes it liable to the complications which lead to inevitable disaster. That being granted, there is no escape from the horror in which each ultimately finds himself involved.

When once the tragic movement is started, Shakespeare has no hesitation, in defiance of Aristotle, in wrecking the happiness of the fairest spirits. What does Desdemona do to deserve her fate? Wherein has Ophelia offended that she should be driven to madness and death? And is it not the touching sincerity, the filial loyalty of Cordelia that form the occasion of her sad destiny? By their own act they surround themselves by the circumstances which ultimately work their ruin; but their act is in no sense morally blameworthy. What alone could check the flow of our pity would be the suggestion that there is no real dramatic necessity for their misery; but on this point Shakespeare leaves us in no doubt. Those whom he dooms are caught in meshes which cannot be broken through. If Desdemona, or Cordelia, or Ophelia were allowed to live, we should feel that there was no justification for calling into activity the tremendous energies with which they are forced into collision. The thunder having begun to crash, and the lightning to blaze across the sky, it is inevitable that the storm should exhaust itself, that the mind of the spectator should be wrought to stillness and repose only when passion has done its worst.

If any justification were needed for the agony of such characters as Desdemona and Cordelia, it would be found in the delight imparted by their splendid spiritual qualities. After all, they do not die. All that is deepest and truest in them—their tenderness, loyalty, purity, infinite capacity for self-sacrifice—lives for ever in the memory of

those who have seen it triumph over the ruthless shocks of fortune. Pity is almost lost in admiration. We can scarce bring ourselves to desire that calamities should be avoided which are the means of revealing to us the glorious heights to which the human soul may sometimes rise.

Closely as several of Shakespeare's tragedies resemble, in the feelings they arouse, the Greek drama, there are others which have little or nothing in common with it. Take, for instance, "Richard III." It is true we pity his victims; but of the two tragic feelings mentioned by Aristotle only one is directed towards Richard himself; and that is not merely fear, but terror: not terror for ourselves, but terror experienced in sympathy with those who have the ill fortune to block up his path to success. Lessing himself, it will be remembered, speaks of Richard in "Laokoon" as "a devil." How could the evil fate of a devil be supposed to touch the hearts of the spectators? We may have a feeling closely akin to admiration for the tremendous audacity of Richard, for the power exerted by his dark spirit over weaker minds, for his boundless energy and resource; but he is so desperate a criminal that he does not even pity himself, and knows that when he is gone not a single soul will deplore his destiny. In Macbeth, to the very last, conscience is never completely silenced; but he excites no more pity than Richard. His tyranny is so vast, so heartless, that he passes away amid the rejoicings of the world whose most vital principles he has outraged.

Even in those plays whose effect reminds us of ancient tragedy, there are conceptions directly opposed to Aristotle's teaching. Goneril and Regan, for instance, are monsters of wickedness. They are not connected with ordinary humanity by a single kindly prompting; nor did Shakespeare wish that any feeling but relief should be stirred by their death. The like is true of Iago, who can be described only as a thing evil without any soul of good: a cynic altogether beyond the pale of human sympathy. Hence when his hour of agony comes, our only regret is that it should have been so long delayed.

Other plays of magnificent power, although they arouse pity, do not stir it in any intense degree. Coriolanus is too haughty to awaken deep compassion; we feel that such a man would resent pity as an injury to his dignity. And in "Julius Cæsar" we are less struck by the destiny of the various characters than by the lofty spirit of republican ardour, the relentless idealism, which fills the soul of Brutus. We are certainly not supplied with the key to these splendid works when we are told that the object of all tragedy is to arouse pity and fear.

If, then, we take Shakespeare rather than Aristotle as the test by which to judge of the fitness of themes for tragic treatment, we shall not, as Lessing so hardily does, cast aside as unworthy of the name of tragedy the masterpieces of the classical period of French literature. Images of terror and of heroic beauty do not, indeed, so penetrate us as those which arouse pity and fear; they do not bring us into the presence of the greatest problems of life, or stimulate to its utmost activity the imagination of the spectator. But the best of all proofs that they are within the legitimate province of the tragic poet is afforded by the use that Shakespeare makes of them. If we condemn "Polyeucte" simply because it is monstrous that misery should be brought upon finely touched spirits, we certainly cannot retain Cordelia; if the Cleopatra of "Rodogune" is rejected for no other reason than that her crimes make pity for her fate impossible, we must assuredly dismiss along with her Richard III. and Iago.

The characteristic of tragedy is that it sets forth a conflict of human passions inevitably resulting in disaster; and it is to subject the tragic poet to arbitrary limits to say that he shall confine himself to this passion or that. All passions are open to him, and he may as legitimately produce horror and admiration as pity and fear. Only, he must not suppose that his sole, or even his highest, task is to excite these emotions. He must arouse them in association with a profound intellectual interest; otherwise the commonest

murder might properly be called a tragedy, and every martyr would have an indisputable claim to the title of a tragic hero.

The real distinction between Shakespeare and the French classic dramatists is not that they select different themes, but that they treat them in a wholly different way. Shakespeare's villains are true to deep laws of human nature; and his men and women of heroic virtue have warm blood coursing in their veins. Corneille and Racine do not so much attempt to create actual men and women, as men and women dominated by a single idea: whose existence, apart from the influence of that idea, would be impossible. We have, therefore, no right to ask from them the same effects as those which Shakespeare produces. The two ideals are directly opposed to each other; but in the large and generous world of art there is ample room for both.

V.

One of the ruling principles of the "Dramaturgie" is, that the dramatist must bestow the utmost care on the construction of "the fable." "Aristotle," says Lessing, "recommends nothing to the tragic poet more than the good composition of the fable; and he has sought to make nothing easy to him by more or by finer remarks than this. For it is the fable which especially makes the poet a poet: manners, sentiments, and expression ten will succeed in for one who is blameless and excellent here. He defines the fable as the imitation of an action, *πράξεως*, and an action is to him a combination of incidents, *σύνθεσις πραγμάτων*. The action is the whole, the incidents are the parts of the whole; and as the goodness of every whole depends upon the goodness of its individual parts and their connection, a tragic action is more or less perfect according as the incidents of which it consists more or less correspond, each for itself and all together, to the aims of tragedy."[1]

[1] S. S. vii. p. 160.

The most essential condition of the action, according to Lessing, is that it shall possess unity. That is, it must form a whole, of which each part has its proper place in the scheme; and the parts must not follow one another in haphazard fashion, but each must be grounded in those that go before, and naturally lead to those that come after. In criticising Corneille's "Rodogune," he presents a vivid picture of the manner in which, in his opinion, a true poet will compose his tragic action: "The poet finds in history a woman who kills her husband and sons; such a deed can awaken terror and pity, and he proposes to himself to make a tragedy of it. But history tells him nothing more than the mere fact, and this is as hideous as it is extraordinary. At most there are three scenes, and, as we do not know the exact circumstances, three improbable scenes. What, then, does the poet do? As he more or less deserves this name, improbability or meagre brevity will appear the greatest defect of his piece. If he is in the first case, he will before all things be anxious to invent a series of causes and effects, according to which these improbable crimes could not but happen. Not content with grounding their possibility in mere historical credibility, he will seek so to form his characters, he will seek to cause the events which set his characters in action to spring so necessarily from one another, he will seek so accurately to adjust the passions of each character to those of the rest, he will seek to bring these passions to an issue through such gradual stages, that we shall everywhere perceive only the most natural, the most ordinary course. At every step which he makes his characters take we shall be forced to confess that, in the same degree of passion, in the same position of affairs, we ourselves should act in the same way. Nothing will surprise us but the imperceptible approach to a goal from which our imaginations tremblingly hold back, and at which we at last find ourselves, full of the profoundest pity for those whom so fatal

a torrent has swept there, and full of terror at the consciousness that a like torrent may sweep us also there, to experience things which in cold blood we believe to be far removed from us. If the poet takes this path, and his genius tells him that he must not shamefully become tired upon it, the meagre brevity of his fable will at once disappear. He will no longer be at a loss how to fill five acts with so few events; he will only be troubled that five acts cannot include all the material which, as he works, increases more and more, after he has come upon a trace of its hidden organisation, and understands how to follow it out."

In opposition to the true poet, the man of wit, the clever versifier, will feel no difficulty in the improbability of the crimes. On the contrary, he will consider this their chief merit: he will trust mainly to their strangeness for the excitement of terror and pity. "For he knows so little wherein this terror and this pity consist, that to produce the former he thinks he cannot heap up enough of strange, unexpected, incredible, monstrous things; and to awaken the latter he supposes he must have recourse to the most extraordinary, the most hideous misfortunes and acts of violence. When, therefore, he has hunted up in history a Cleopatra, a murderess of her husband and her sons, he sees nothing more to do, in order to make a tragedy of the tale, than to fill up the gaps between the two crimes, and to fill them up with things which are at least as surprising as the crimes themselves. All this, his inventions and his historical materials, he kneads into a long, finely incomprehensible romance; and when he has kneaded it as well as chopped straw and flour can be kneaded, he brings his dough to the framework of acts and scenes, makes his characters narrate and narrate, rave and rhyme; and in four or six weeks, after rhyming has become easier or more disagreeable to him, the miracle is complete. He calls it a tragedy—it is printed and represented—read and seen—admired or hissed—preserved or

forgotten, as dear fortune wills, for *et habent sua fata libelli.*"[1]

Lessing implies in this passage that the dramatist must altogether banish accident from his scheme. This, however, is not supported by reference to Shakespeare. What could be more accidental than the dropping of Desdemona's handkerchief? Yet it is one of the most important links in the chain of the tragedy. And in "Hamlet" the solution is at last brought about by several purely accidental circumstances. Human fortune is constantly affected by small unforeseen incidents; and the drama mirrors this as truly as every other important element of existence. The sole conditions are that the accidents interwoven by the dramatist shall be in themselves not improbable, and that the actions to which they give rise shall be in full accord with the characters of the persons with whose destiny they are connected.

Of the unities of time and place Lessing says comparatively little. He points out that the Greek dramatists regarded them as merely the logical consequence of the unity of action; and but for the chorus they would not have been more strictly observed than the unity of action demanded. "As it was necessary that the action should be witnessed by a crowd of persons, and the crowd remained always the same, and would neither go farther from their dwellings nor remain longer out of them than people generally do from mere curiosity, the dramatists could hardly avoid limiting the place to one and the same individual spot, and the time to one and the same day."[2] Far from considering these two unites a disadvantage, Lessing believes that they were of genuine service. "The Greek dramatists submitted *bonâ fide* to this limitation, but with so much suppleness, with so much intelligence, that seven times out of nine they won more than they lost by it. For they made this compulsion an occasion of so simplifying the action itself, of so carefully separating from it everything superfluous, that,

[1] S. S. vii. p. 134.

[2] S. S. vii. p. 193.

reduced to its essential elements, it became an ideal of the action: an ideal most happily realised in precisely the form that demanded least addition from the circumstances of time and place."

What Lessing meant by "the ideal of an action" he explains in one of the fragments of his "Laokoon." "It consists," he says, "(1) in the shortening of time, (2) in the intensifying of impulses and the exclusion of accident, (3) in the awakening of the passions."[1]

The case was very different with the French. Accustomed to the wild freedom of the Spanish drama before they became acquainted with "Greek simplicity," they had no true appreciation of the unity of action. Hence the unities of time and place were adopted by them merely as outward rules for which there was no inward necessity; and they strove to apply them with a rigour which could only be required by the presence of the chorus. "As, however, they found how difficult, how impossible sometimes, this is, they came to a compromise with the tyrannical rules to which they had not courage enough to renounce allegiance. Instead of a single place, they introduced an undefined place, by which might be understood now one thing, now another; it sufficed if the various places did not lie too far from each other, and none needed a special decoration. For the unity of the day they substituted the unity of time; a certain period in which one never heard of the rising or the setting of the sun, in which nobody went to bed—at any rate oftener than once—however many things might happen, was allowed to pass for one day."

Lessing does not blame the French for having thus extended the two unities. "Unquestionably," he says, "excellent pieces may be so created; and there is a proverb —'bore the plank where it is thinnest.'" "But," he continues, "I must let my neighbour also bore there. I must not perpetually show him the thickest edge, the most knotty part of the plank, and call out, 'Bore there!' That

[1] S. S. xi. (1), p. 151.

is where I bore!' All the French critics call out in this way; especially when they come upon the dramatic pieces of the English. What a stir they make about regularity, which they have rendered so easy for themselves!"[1]

The unities of time and place as understood by the Greeks he would neither impose upon nor forbid to the modern dramatist. His sole remark about obedience to them is that "the most strict regularity would not make up for the smallest mistake in the characters." Critics of the Romantic school have often made these much-despised unities a subject of easy satire. In a more liberal spirit Lessing leaves each dramatist to act upon or to neglect them in accordance with the impulses of his individual genius.

In the conception of the characters Lessing requires above all things that the dramatist shall be true to nature. Next to the fact that they misunderstood the real aim of tragedy, his chief accusation against the French classic dramatists is that nature does not form the basis of their creations. "The monstrous, the gigantic, Corneille ought to have been called, not the great; for nothing is great which is not true."

Hence the language of the characters ought not to be forced or pompous. The presence of the chorus in the Greek drama made it necessary that the action should be carried on by means of large and swelling utterance; but now that the chorus is dismissed there is, says Lessing, no need for other than unconstrained speech. He makes this remark in connection with a few passages he has translated from an English play, in which common expressions are put into the mouth of Queen Elizabeth. He knows, he asserts, that some people will shrug their shoulders and say: "It is easy to be seen that the good man does not know the great world, that he has not heard many queens talk; Racine understood the matter better; but then Racine lived at court." "So much the worse for queens," retorts Lessing, "if they do not really so speak, if they dare not

[1] S. S. vii. p. 194.

so speak. I have long believed that the court is not the place in which a poet can best study nature. If pomp and etiquette make men machines, it is the task of the poet to make the machines men again. Real queens may speak as affectedly as they will; his queens must speak naturally. Let him listen diligently to the Hekuba of Euripides, and console himself if he has heard no other queens. Nothing is more chaste and becoming than simple nature. Coarseness and filth are as far removed from that as fustian and bombast from the sublime."[1]

It is sometimes said that Lessing carried his enthusiasm for "simple nature" so far as to condemn the use of verse in the drama. This is, however, a mistake. He merely maintains that a good prose translation of a poetical play is better than a poor translation in verse: surely not a very daring assertion.

Notwithstanding his confidence in the power of "nature," he was as far as possible from supposing that the dramatic poet has nothing to do but to reproduce what he sees in the actual world. The critic who in discussing art laid so much stress upon the necessity of ideal treatment, was not likely to fall into this blunder in discussing the highest type of poetry. Nature lies at the root of all great poetry, but it is nature which has been submitted to a process of severe selection and coloured with the hues of imagination. No one recognised this more fully than Lessing. He speaks of a large class of persons "who consider the embellishment of nature an idle fancy." "A nature which aims at being more beautiful than nature is, they think, on that very account not nature." These persons, he says, "would find it difficult to take pleasure in the masterpieces of the ancients."[2] "In nature everything is connected with everything else; all things intersect, exchange with each other, and are transformed into one another. But in this infinite variety nature is a spectacle only for an infinite Spirit. That finite spirits may share

[1] S. S. vii. p. 250. [2] S. S. vii. p. 295.

the enjoyment of it, they must have the power to put limits to it which it has not: the power to separate one thing from another, and to devote their attention according to their will. This power we exercise every moment of our lives. Without it there would be no life for us; before too many causes of feeling we should feel nothing; we should be a constant prey to present impressions; we should dream without knowing what we dreamt. The vocation of art is to save us the necessity of this separation of one thing from another in the realm of the beautiful, to render easy the fixing of the attention. Everything which in nature we separate, or desire to be able to separate, from an object or from a connected series of objects, be it in time or space, art really separates for us, and gives us the object, or the connected series of objects, as clearly and concisely as the feeling it is intended to create permits."[1]

In the article in which this occurs he is discussing the question how far the Spanish custom of mixing tragic and comic elements in one play is admissible;[2] and his conclusion is: "If we are witnessing an important and touching occurrence, and another of no importance attracts our notice, we seek to avoid as much as possible the dissipation of attention with which this threatens us. We abstract ourselves from it; and it must necessarily disgust us to find in art that which in nature we should wish away." On one condition alone will he allow that the tragic and the comic may be combined: they must be so intimately connected that we cannot conceive them dissociated. "Only then we do not desire in art to see the one abstracted from the other, and art knows how to turn the impossibility to its own advantage."

Diderot had maintained that while the characters of comedy ought to be types, those of tragedy are of neces-

[1] S. S. vii. p. 296.

[2] It was one of Lessing's merits that he was the first to suggest to the Germans the wealth of Spanish dramatic literature.

sity merely individuals. Lessing, on the contrary, following Aristotle, urges that the characters both of tragedy and comedy ought to be typical. That is, we ought to feel that each personage acts not in an exceptional, eccentric manner, but precisely as every man or woman of like character would act in like circumstances. "It is true, as Diderot asserts, that if the comic poet gave his characters such individual features that only a single person in the world would correspond to them, he would put comedy back into its childhood and transform it into satire. But it is not less true that the tragic poet who represented only this and that man—Cæsar and Cato, for instance—according to all the peculiarities which we know of them, without at the same time showing how their peculiarities harmonise with the character which Cæsar and Cato may have in common with others, would enervate tragedy and degrade it to the position of history."[1]

Another of the many doctrines of Aristotle which Lessing repeats in a new form is that each character must act consistently with itself. "There must be nothing in the characters contradictory; they must be always uniform, always remain like themselves. They may express themselves now more strongly, now more weakly, according as circumstances affect them; but none of these circumstances must be powerful enough to change them from black to white."[2]

The motives by which the characters are impelled ought not, he insists, to be exceptional. In "Rodogune" Cleopatra is made to act mainly from ambition. Lessing maintains that this was a profound mistake on the part of Corneille. "In history, Cleopatra kills her husband from jealousy. 'From jealousy?' thought Corneille: 'that would be quite a common woman: no, my Cleopatra must be a heroine who is indifferent about losing her husband, but will by no means lose the throne. That her husband loves Rodogune must not pain her so much

[1] S. S. vii. p. 372. [2] S. S. vii. p. 143.

as that Rodogune is to be queen, like herself: that is far more sublime.' Quite true; far more sublime, and—far more unnatural. For, in the first place, pride generally is a more unnatural, a more artificial crime than jealousy. Second, the pride of a woman is still more unnatural than the pride of a man. It is love, not a passion for power, to which nature inclines women; they should awake tenderness, not fear; their charms alone should make them powerful; they should prevail only by caresses, and should not wish to dominate more than they can enjoy. A woman whom power, for the sake of power, delights, in whom all passions are subordinate to ambition, who knows no other happiness than to command, to tyrannise, and to put her foot upon the neck of whole peoples: of such women there may have been more than one example, but they are exceptions; and whoever describes an exception certainly does not describe what is most natural."[1] Yet, in making everything subordinate to ambition in Cleopatra, Corneille did no more than Shakespeare did in regard to Lady Macbeth. According to the chronicles, the latter was impelled by a thirst for revenge in devising the death of Duncan. Shakespeare, however, deliberately omits all reference to her wrongs, and fills her with a passionate longing for the crown.

It was in Lessing's time a general belief that the true themes of tragedy are to be found only in history. This theory could not please Lessing, to whom the idea was always more than the bare fact; and he makes a vigorous protest against it. "Aristotle long ago decided how far the tragic poet has to trouble himself about historical truth: only in so far as it resembles a well-arranged fable which can be made to suit his purpose. He does not use historical facts because they have happened, but because they have so happened that he could with difficulty invent anything better adapted to his aim. If he happens to light upon facts adapted for dramatic

[1] S. S. vii. p. 127.

treatment, they are welcome to him; but it is not worth his while to study books of history patiently in search of them. How many know what has happened? If we conclude that a thing is possible because it has happened, what is to hinder us from considering an invented fable a true history of which we have never heard? What is the first thing that makes a history credible to us? Is it not the fact that it is in itself probable? And is it not all the same whether this probability is confirmed by no witnesses or traditions whatever, or by such as have never yet come to our knowledge? There is no ground for the idea that the vocation of the theatre is to maintain the memory of great men; that is for history, not for the theatre. In the theatre we do not wish to learn what this or that man has done, but what every man of a certain character in certain given circumstances would do. The aim of tragedy is far more philosophical than the aim of history;[1] and to make it a mere panegyric on famous men, or to misuse it for the purpose of fostering national vanity, is to lower its true dignity."[2]

In dealing with certain criticisms by Voltaire on the "Essex" of the younger Corneille, Lessing again defines the relation of the dramatic poet to history. "It is one of the weaknesses of M. de Voltaire that he wishes to pass for a profound historian. In treating of 'Essex,' therefore, he mounted his war-horse, and made it prance furiously. It is a pity that the deeds he accomplishes on it are not worth the dust he raises. . . . Why does the tragic poet select real names? Does he take his characters from these names, or does he take these names because the characters which history associates with them have more or less resemblance to the characters he proposes to set in action? I do not speak of the manner in which most tragedies have perhaps arisen, but of the manner in which they ought to have

[1] This is the repetition of a famous saying of Aristotle's in the ninth chapter of the "Poetics." The meaning is that tragedy deals with types of character, history with individuals.

[2] S. S. vii. p. 81.

arisen. Or, to express myself in a manner more in harmony with the ordinary practice of poets, is it on account of the mere facts, the circumstances of time and place, or is it on account of the characters of the persons through whom these facts have occurred, that the poet chooses one set of events rather than another? If it is on account of the characters, is not the question already decided how far the poet may depart from historical truth? In everything that does not concern the characters, as far as he likes. Only the characters must remain sacred to him. He may impart to these something from his own mind only to intensify them and place them in the best light; the smallest essential change would destroy the reason why they bear these and not other names, and nothing is more displeasing than anything for which we can give no reason." [1]

It is one of Lessing's favourite principles that the tragic poet goes to history only for the sake of characters, and that certain historical characters are to be preferred to others only because they are in an uncommon degree typical of great human qualities. "As the Sokrates of Aristophanes neither represented nor was intended to represent the individual man of this name; as this personified ideal of a vain and dangerous scholastic wisdom received the name of Sokrates only because Sokrates was partly known, and it was intended that he should be still better known, as such a deceiver and seducer; as the mere idea of position and character which was associated, and which it was intended should be still more closely associated, with the name of Sokrates, decided the poet in the choice of this name: so the idea of the character which we are accustomed to associate with the names Regulus, Cato, Brutus, is the cause why the tragic poet gives his characters these names. He represents a Regulus, a Brutus, not to make us acquainted with the real deeds of these men, not to renew our recollection of them, but to entertain us with such deeds as men of their character may and must perform.

[1] S. S. vii. p. 100.

It is, indeed, true that we have abstracted their character from their actual deeds; but it does not follow that their character must conduct us back to their deeds. It may often lead us far more shortly, far more naturally, to quite different actions, with which the real deeds have nothing in common except that the latter spring from the same source as the former, but have flowed over roundabout ways and through soil which has spoiled their purity. In this case the poet will much prefer the invented to the actual deeds, but will still give the true names to his characters."[1]

The only changes in Lessing's opinion which ought to be made in the representation of a historical character are changes which bring into clear prominence its most essential qualities. "The poetical ideal of the real character" is the name he applies to the Elizabeth of the younger Corneille; and it would not be possible to find a better designation for the majority of the historical characters of Shakespeare.

Although Lessing maintained that the tragic poet should be true in the main to the dispositions of men who have really lived, he thought an error here of much less importance than any inconsistency in invented characters. "It always seems to me a far more pardonable error in the poet not to give his personages the characters which history gives them, than to make a mistake in voluntarily chosen characters. The former mistake is perfectly compatible with genius; but not the latter. To the man of genius it is granted not to know a thousand things which every schoolboy knows; not the acquired contents of his memory, but that which he is able to bring forth from himself, from his own feeling, makes his wealth. What he has heard or read he may either forget or may not know, except in so far as it suits his purpose; he goes wrong, therefore, now from confidence, now from pride, sometimes intentionally, sometimes unintentionally, so often, so grossly,

[1] S. S. vii. p. 379.

that we cannot express our wonder enough to other good people. We stand in amazement, clap our hands, and exclaim: 'But how could so great a man be so ignorant? How is it possible it did not occur to him? Did he not reflect, then?' Oh! let us be silent; we think we humiliate him, and only make ourselves ridiculous in his eyes. Everything we know better than he only proves that we went more diligently to school than he; but, unfortunately, that was necessary if we were not to continue perfect blockheads."

This little outburst occurs in connection with a criticism of Favart's "Soliman II.," a comedy based upon a tale by Marmontel. Of the latter he says: "Marmontel's 'Soliman' might have been for me quite a different 'Soliman,' and his 'Roxelane' a quite different 'Roxelane,' from those of whom history teaches me, if I had only found that although they are not of this world, they might nevertheless belong to another world: to a world whose events are connected in a different order, but as rigorously as here; to a world in which causes and effects follow in a different series, but are arranged for the same general good result; in short, to the world of a genius who (let it be allowed to me to indicate the Creator without name by his noblest creature!), imitating on a small scale the highest Genius, places, exchanges, diminishes, enlarges the parts of the present world in order to make from it a whole of his own with which he connects his own aims." [1]

In dealing with historical material, Lessing maintains, the dramatist is bound to select motives which shall be thoroughly intelligible in his own time. He, therefore, censures Cronegk for introducing an act of gross superstition in "Olint and Sophronia." "It does not justify the poet that there have been times when such superstition was general, and that it could co-exist with many good qualities; that there are still lands in which the pious simplicity would not seem strange. For he no more wrote his

[1] S. S. vii. p. 143.

tragedy for those times than he intended to have it represented in Bohemia or Spain. The good author, to whatever class he belongs, if he does not write merely to display his wit, his learning, has always the most enlightened and the best men of his age and country in mind, and only what will please, what will move these he cares to write. When the dramatist lets himself down to the mob, he does so only to enlighten and improve it; not to strengthen it in its prejudices, in its ignoble ways of thinking."[1]

VI.

No name occurs in the "Dramaturgie" more frequently than that of Voltaire. Lessing attacks him with considerable bitterness, not only exposing his literary sins but occasionally making side references to his notorious moral defects. "There are not," he says of one of his utterances, "more than three untruths in this passage, and for M. de Voltaire that is not much." He is equally severe in his allusions to Voltaire's restless vanity, attacking him, for instance, with great vigour for appearing before the curtain after the representation of "Mérope" at the call of the audience, and thus beginning a custom whose sole object is to gratify idle curiosity and to minister to personal conceit. Lessing was not ignorant of the great qualities of Voltaire, but he felt himself under no particular obligation to dwell upon these. Opinion was dominated by the illustrious Frenchman almost as much on the eastern as on the western side of the Rhine, and it was now one of the supreme objects of Lessing's life to deliver his countrymen from slavish submission to France. If the power of Voltaire could be broken, there was no fear that his place would be given to any other literary dictator.

"Mérope" is the tragedy by Voltaire which is subjected to the most elaborate criticism. It was professedly suggested by the "Mérope" of Maffei, but Lessing proves at

[1] S. S. vii. p. 10.

great length that it is in reality a mere reproduction of that play, with only a few changes here and there, and these not always improvements. He so far accommodates himself to the methods of criticism usual in his day as to prove that Voltaire does not even observe the unities of time and place; but he enters upon this task unwillingly. "It requires," he says, "much self-command to consider a work of genius from this point of view;" and when he has concluded, he exclaims: "But it disgusts me to dwell longer on these elementary matters. If the 'Mérope' of Voltaire and the 'Mérope' of Maffei could only have lasted eight days and been represented in seven places in Greece! If they only had beauties which should make me forget such pedantries!"[1]

The large style of Lessing's criticism is also indicated in his allusion to the fact that Voltaire long keeps the spectator in uncertainty as to the identity of his hero. "It is true our surprise is greater if we do not learn with full assurance that Ægisthus is Ægisthus till Mérope herself learns it. But the pitiful pleasure of a surprise! And what does the poet gain by surprising us? Let him surprise his characters as much as he will; we shall know how to take part in their experience even if we long foresee what must unexpectedly strike them. Yes, our sympathy will be the stronger and more lively the longer and more certainly we foresee it."[2]

This contempt for the small pleasure of a surprise—which had already been expressed by Diderot—induces him to defend Euripides for revealing the issues of his plots. "The most tragic of all tragic poets knew that the gratification of childish curiosity is the smallest achievement of his art. Without hesitation, therefore, he let his spectators know as much of the forthcoming action as only a god could know, and undertook that the effect he should produce would not so much depend upon what would happen as upon the way in which it would

[1] S. S. vii. p. 195.

[2] S. S. vii. p. 201.

happen."[1] Lessing even suggests that this custom was one of Aristotle's reasons for calling Euripides the most tragic of tragic poets, since the spectators, knowing from the beginning the fate of the different characters, were affected by pity during the whole course of the play. "Sokrates," he adds,[2] "was the teacher and friend of Euripides; and many might be of opinion that the poet had to thank this friendship of the philosopher for nothing more than the wealth of beautiful moral sayings which he so prodigally expends in his pieces. I think he was much more indebted to it; without it he might have been quite as sententious, but perhaps not so tragical. Beautiful sentences are precisely what we hear most seldom from a philosopher like Sokrates; his mode of life is the sole morality he preaches. But to know men and ourselves, to be attentive to our own feelings, in everything to seek out and love the smoothest and shortest ways of nature, to judge everything according to its ultimate object: it is this that we learn in intercourse with him; it is this that Euripides learned from Sokrates, and that made him the first in his art. Happy the poet who has such a friend, and who can every day, every hour, consult him!"

As to the objection that Euripides thus confounded two different species of poetry, the narrative and the dramatic, Lessing says: "What does the talk about the confounding of the different kinds of poetry come to in the long-run? In the text-books let them be distinguished as sharply as possible; but if a man of genius, for higher aims, causes several of them to be mingled in one and the same work, we must forget the text-book, and examine merely whether his higher aims have been attained."[3]

This passage is not only remarkable as showing how much more highly Lessing estimated Euripides than the majority of later German critics, but as proving how complete was the independence he conceded to genius. No one could be more anxious than he to mark the limits

[1] S. S. vii. p. 204. [2] S. S. vii. p. 208. [3] S. S. vii. p. 205.

which separate one art from another; yet here he allows that to a poet of the foremost rank it is lawful to break down these bounds for the sake of a greater gain. That he did not think lightly of the laws of art is obvious on every page of the "Dramaturgie;" he strove with steady patience and with insight unsurpassed in his time to detect and expound them. But, after all, he considered them of practical use only to intellects of the second order. The man of genius, he believed, acts upon them unconsciously; and if he breaks through accepted rules, the business of criticism is not to condemn him offhand, but to find out whether he is not in harmony with a deeper principle.

In criticising Voltaire's "Semiramis" he takes the appearance of the ghost as a sort of test of the general merits of the play. To bring a ghost upon the stage of a rational community was so bold a step that Voltaire had felt himself bound to justify it; and his main defence was that although men no longer believed in ghosts the belief in them was universal in ancient times. Lessing admits that this made it lawful for ancient writers to use them; but, in accordance with his principle that the dramatist is bound to appeal to the sentiments of his own day, he denies that it can justify modern dramatists in doing so, even if their scenes are laid in these remote periods. "The dramatic poet is not a historian; he does not relate what was formerly believed to have happened, but makes it happen now before our eyes. And he makes it happen not for the sake of strict historical truth, but for a quite different and higher purpose; historical truth is not his end, but the means to his end; he wishes to cause illusion and by illusion to move us."[1] The real ground which justifies the dramatist in introducing ghosts is, he maintains, that belief in them is not absolutely dead; the germs of the old superstition so far survive that a poet who is master of human passion may still make them the means of producing a striking effect. "Such a poet is Shakespeare, and

[1] S. S. vii. p. 49.

Shakespeare almost alone. Before his ghost in "Hamlet" the hair stands on end, whether it covers a credulous or an incredulous brain. M. de Voltaire acts unadvisedly in appealing to this ghost: it makes him and his spirit of Ninus—ridiculous." [1]

The ghost in "Hamlet" appears at the dead of night, the time when the mind is most readily affected by what is strange and mysterious, and when, according to all tradition, visitants from the other world have been most often seen. Voltaire makes his ghost come forth in open day, and stalk into the midst of the States of the Empire, announced by a clap of thunder. "Where has Voltaire ever heard that ghosts are so confident? What old woman could not have told him that ghosts shun the sunlight, and do not willingly visit great companies? Voltaire knew this perfectly; but he was too timid, too fastidious, to make use of these common circumstances; he would show us a ghost, but it should be a ghost of a nobler sort; and by this nobler sort he spoiled everything. The ghost that takes the liberty to do things which are against all usage, against all good manners among ghosts, does not seem to me a right ghost; and everything that does not here help illusion spoils it." [2]

Lessing makes much of the fact that while Voltaire's ghost appeared to a crowd, Shakespeare's speaks to Hamlet alone. Every member of the crowd must be powerfully affected; hence the attention is withdrawn from the central figures. But in Shakespeare "all our observation is turned towards Hamlet, and the more signs of horror we perceive in him, the more prepared are we to deem the appearance which causes this horror in him to be that which he deems it. The ghost affects us more through him than through itself." [3]

Again, Shakespeare's ghost impresses us as a living being, and excites not only terror but pity. Voltaire's is only a piece of poetical machinery. Ninus rises from the

[1] S. S. vii. p. 51. [2] S. S. vii. p. 51. [3] S. S. vii. p. 52.

grave merely to enforce the doctrine that to bring hidden crimes to light the eternal powers do not hesitate to break through even their own laws: a doctrine in any case, says Lessing, by no means edifying, since it is infinitely more impressive to believe that justice is done by the working of strictly natural causes.

The only other tragedy of Voltaire's which is discussed is "Zaire." A critic had asserted that this drama was dictated to its author by love. "He would have spoken more truly," Lessing retorts, "if he had said—gallantry." Here again Voltaire is unfavourably contrasted with Shakespeare. "I know only one tragedy in which love itself has aided the poet: the 'Romeo and Juliet' of Shakespeare. It is true that Voltaire makes his Zaire express her feelings very finely, very becomingly; but what is this expression compared with that living picture of all the smallest, most secret artifices through which love glides into the soul, of all the unobserved advantages it wins there, of all the devices by which it subordinates every other passion to itself till it becomes the sole tyrant of all our sympathies and antagonisms?"[1]

No one is now likely to dispute that "Romeo and Juliet" presents a far truer image of love than "Zaire;" but it may be doubted whether Lessing successfully indicates the method in which Shakespeare's triumph is attained. We do not find that in the case of either Romeo or Juliet love thus gently works its way to the innermost citadel: the effect of each upon the other is absolutely instantaneous. They no sooner look into each other's eyes than devotion is kindled within their passionate natures: love cannot mount higher than it rises at the first stroke. And this lightning-like rapidity in the movement of strong feeling is to be noted not only here but in all Shakespeare's work. The souls he depicts are charged with an energy ready at all times to burst forth: they dart to results which less quickened minds reach only by slow and

[1] S. S. vii. p. 65.

cautious steps. The very idea of the drama requires that mental processes shall be thus intensified. The epic poet, the novelist, may advance as they please: they have time to stop by the way, and indicate the minutest changes in their progress. The dramatist is placed within stricter limits; he must put passion under pressure, and force it to yield up its secrets.[1]

Orosman, the hero of "Zaire," was suggested to Voltaire by Othello. Said Cibber:

> "From rack'd Othello's rage he rais'd his style,
> And snatch'd the brand that lights this tragic pile."

"I should have said," Lessing adds,[2] after quoting these lines, "a brand from this flaming pyre, and one which rather smokes than lights and warms. In Orosman we hear a jealous person speak, we see him execute the rash deed of a jealous person; but of jealousy itself we learn neither more nor less than we before knew. Othello, on the other hand, is the most perfect text-book concerning this melancholy madness; there we learn everything that concerns it, that can awaken and prevent it."

Few, however, who have read Coleridge will accept this as an adequate account of Othello. To say that he is dominated by mere jealousy, and that we can study in him the workings of no higher passion, is to dwarf the proportions of one of the grandest of Shakespeare's conceptions. Jealousy, the pettiest of human passions, implies a watchful and suspicious temper; but Othello is frank, generous, and impulsive. It is true he condemns his wife without adequate proof; but he does so because his passionate nature ill fits him for the sifting of evidence. He does not slay her because he feels his honour wounded. She has been, it must be remembered, his ideal of perfect goodness; in her he has found the revelation of all that

[1] See this idea well worked out by Mr. W. Minto in his "Characteristics of English Poets," p. 416. Lessing does not, however, intend, as Mr. Minto supposes, to describe Shakespeare's general method of dealing with passion. The allusion is solely to the growth of love in the hearts of Juliet and Romeo.

[2] S. S. vii. p. 66.

is fairest and noblest in the world. Suddenly his ideal is shattered; the image he had thought so divine proves, he believes, to be of common clay. To one moved by feelings of so much fire and vehemence, nothing remains but to remove from his sight that which has so deeply deceived him. The task is a sorry one, for love cannot at once pass away with the foundation on which it has rested; but the ideal which is the object of his love makes it imperative that he should destroy the wretched reality which has displaced it. And when he has killed Desdemona, we feel, even if he should not learn his fatal mistake, that he himself must follow, since to a man of his temper such an experience must make life a burden and misery. If jealousy has any part whatever in the evolution of the action, it is a subordinate one; the supreme motive is one more befitting a great and lofty nature.

VII.

Although tragedy mainly occupies the attention of Lessing in the "Dramaturgie," a good many comedies are also criticised. As he considers the pleasure derived from ideal pity and fear the immediate object of tragedy, so he represents the pleasure derived from laughter as the immediate object of comedy. This is adequate so long as we merely contrast comedy with tragedy; but to distinguish it from farce, we must add that its immediate object is "*thoughtful* laughter."[1]

Comedy is designed to excite laughter, but not, says Lessing, derision. Through this distinction he disposes of Rousseau's angry attack on Molière for making us in "Le Misanthrope" laugh at "the honourable man of the play." We laugh at him, but do not deride him. "The misanthrope does not become contemptible; he remains what he is, and the laughter that springs from the situation in

[1] This is the definition given by Mr. George Meredith in his powerful essay on "The Idea of Comedy."

which the poet places him does not in the least lessen our respect for him."[1] Lessing believed with Aristotle that the faults with which the comic writer should deal ought not to be those of a thoroughly depraved character. "Every incongruity, every contrast of defect and reality, is ridiculous;" and on this ground he defends Regnard for treating of the defects exposed in "Le Distrait." "We value the other good qualities of 'Le Distrait' as we ought to value them; without them we could not laugh at his distractedness. Let his distractedness be given to a wicked, worthless man, and see whether it will still be ridiculous! Repulsive, disgusting, hateful, it will be; not ridiculous."[2] But is not Tartuffe ridiculous? And with what good qualities is he endowed?

Lessing not only thinks that comic characters should be typical, but maintains that they for the most part were so in the Old Greek comedy. "Even the real names themselves, one may say, often related rather to the typical than to the individual. Under the name of Sokrates, Aristophanes wished to make ridiculous and suspicious not the individual Sokrates but all sophists who undertook the education of young people. The dangerous sophist generally was his subject; and he named the dangerous sophist Sokrates because Sokrates was decried as one. Hence a multitude of traits which did not apply to Sokrates; so that Sokrates could stand up calmly and invite comparison! But how completely the essence of comedy is misunderstood by those who consider these inapplicable traits as deliberate calumnies, and will not take them for what they are, for extensions of the individual character, for the elevation of the personal to the typical!"[3]

The notion that Aristophanes troubled himself only with real things and was indifferent as to plan can be entertained, Lessing asserts, only by those who have never read him. "The argument, the fable of the Old Greek comedy,

[1] S. S. vii. p. 121. [2] S. S. vii. p. 122. [3] S. S. vii. p. 377.

were as well invented as the arguments and fables of the New could ever be. Not a single one of the pieces of Aristophanes which we possess represents an occurrence that actually happened; and how can we say that they were not invented by the poet because they partly allude to real occurrences?" [1]

While laughter is the immediate object of comedy, its ultimate end, like the ultimate end of tragedy, Lessing represents as moral. Here too the ethical is supposed to be indissolubly associated with the æsthetic. "The design of comedy is through laughter—not through derision—to improve: not exactly those bad habits at which it makes us laugh, still less the persons in whom these bad habits are to be found. The true universal use of comedy lies in the laughter itself, in the exercise of our faculty of observing the ridiculous, of observing it easily and quickly under all disguises of passion and fashion, in all its associations with still worse or with good qualities, even in the wrinkles of the most zealous earnestness. Granted that 'L'Avare' of Molière, 'Le Joueur' of Regnard, have never improved a miser or a gamester; granted that laughter cannot improve these fools: so much the worse for them, but not for comedy. It is enough for her, if she cannot heal hopeless maladies, to confirm the healthy in their health. 'L'Avare' is instructive even to the generous man; 'Le Joueur' has lessons even for him who does not play. The follies they do not have, others have with whom they must live; it is of advantage to know those with whom we may come into collision, to guard ourselves against all impressions of example. A preservative is a valuable medicine; and the whole system of ethics has none stronger, more effective, than the ridiculous." [2]

It is noteworthy that English comedy is very differently treated from English tragedy. "The English manner in comedy distracts and tries us; we like a simple plan which may be overlooked at one glance. As the English if they

[1] S. S. vii. p. 96. [2] S. S. vii. p.

wish French pieces to give pleasure on their stage, stuff them with episodes, so we must remove the episodes from English pieces if we would successfully enrich our stage with them. The best comedies of Congreve and Wycherley would without this pruning of too luxuriant growth be intolerable to us."[1]

French comedy, on the other hand, is throughout referred to in terms of genuine appreciation. Even several of Voltaire's comedies receive approval: measured approval, it is true, but probably stronger than the most favourable critic would now care to express. Lessing incidentally—not in the "Dramaturgie"—couples the name of Molière with that of Shakespeare: the highest honour, he believed, which he could confer on any poet. Unfortunately he has occasion to criticise only one play by this greatest of all comic writers: "L'Ecole des Femmes." And here he contents himself with defending the comedy against the accusation of Voltaire that it is made up of narrative without action. Lessing points out that the interest centres not in the things narrated but in their varying effect on the mind of Arnolphe. "Therefore, instead of saying of 'L'Ecole des Femmes' that everything in it appears to be action although everything is in reality narrative, I believe one might say with more justice that everything in it is action although everything appears to be mere narrative."[2]

Even minor French writers, so long as they do not follow in the footsteps of Corneille and Racine, are alluded to with respect. The "Philosophe Marié" of Destouches he pronounces "one of the masterpieces of the French stage." And of Marivaux, of whom, it will be remembered, he was in youth a diligent student, he says: "His ground is of very small compass, but as a true Kallipides of his art, he knows how to run through his narrow region with a number of such short and yet such remarkably irregular steps, that at the end we fancy we have gone over a great

[1] S. S. vii. p. 56. [2] S. S. vii. p. 227.

deal of space with him."[1] In the translation of one of Marivaux's plays, "Arlequin" was rendered "Peter." Lessing protests against this, and not only maintains that the word harlequin should have been kept, but that Gottsched committed a mistake in banishing this grotesque character from the stage. He reminds his readers of the Satyr plays of the Greeks and of the Parasite, and asks why the Germans should affect to be more delicate in their tastes than the Greeks and Romans. Fortunately, in this case his preference for everything that appealed to popular sympathy was not widely shared.

The French "comédie larmoyante," of which he spoke so disparagingly in his "Theatrical Library," he treats in the "Dramaturgie" as of high value. "If," says Lessing, "by tearful is meant what almost brings tears to our eyes, then there are various pieces of this class which are something more than tearful. They cost a sensitive nature streams of tears; and the common mass of French tragedies deserve, in comparison with them, to be called merely tearful. For even these almost bring us so far that we feel as if we might have wept had the poets better understood their art."[2] The reference to "the common mass of French tragedies" explains the change in Lessing's opinion. Since writing the "Theatrical Library" he had acquired so great a distaste for tragedy wholly disconnected from real life, and had become so convinced that Germany could not possess a theatre of her own until she struck out a different path, that he welcomed everything which looked like a return to natural sources of inspiration. Hence he speaks in terms of even warmer praise respecting the closely allied Serious Comedy of Diderot. "Le Fils Naturel," indeed, he no longer considers important; but "Le Père de Famille" he still regards as a work of true genius. Neither in regard to Serious Comedy nor "comédie larmoyante" has posterity upheld his judgment; nevertheless, in approving them his eyes were, as

[1] S. S. vii. p. 77.

[2] S. S. vii. p. 36.

ever, turned towards the central current of the time. For the dramatic achievement of Lachausse and Diderot, feeble as it was, was a symptom of the deep, although only half-conscious, revolt of the European mind against every form of art that does not reflect the actual experience of men and touch their living sympathies.

The few works passing as German comedies which came before him he treated with the same calm impartiality as those dignified with the name of tragedy. Gellert, who addressed a wider public than any other German author —he died while the "Dramaturgie" was in progress—is censured for interpreting the natural method in comedy as if it meant that follies are to be rendered by the dramatist exactly as they appear off the stage. "All over the world fools are dull and cold and repelling; if they are to amuse us, the poet must give them something of his own. He must not bring them upon the stage in their daily garb, in the dirty slovenliness with which they go about dreaming in their petty sphere. They must give no indication of the narrow range of wretched circumstances out of which every one wishes to work himself. He must dress them up, he must lend them wit and understanding to conceal what is miserable in their follies, he must give them the ambition to shine with these qualities."[1]

To Johann Elias Schlegel, who had died too soon to conquer enduring fame, he gives higher praise than to any other German dramatist; but he complains of the best of this writer's comedies that the manners represented are not those of his own land. "We are, however," he adds, "so much accustomed in our comedies to foreign, and especially to French manners, that this does not produce upon us a particularly bad impression."

That both comedy and tragedy, in so far as their interest depends upon manners, ought to reflect the manners of the author's country, is a principle on which Lessing insists with considerable emphasis. It implies that the

[1] S. S. vii. p. 93.

themes shall not be taken from foreign life; but he did not shrink from this implication, pointing to the practice of the Greeks in support of his position. His ground was that the dramatist who derives his material solely from the life of his own people is most readily intelligible, and can most directly advance to the great and enduring problems of human nature. Lessing must for the moment have forgotten that Shakespeare lays the scene of few of his greatest plays in England; and, curiously enough, the scene of neither of the two dramatic works which he himself had yet to complete is laid in Germany.

Even at the present day, Germany does not possess a comedy worthy of her great achievements in other departments of art. The popular mode of accounting for this fact is, that for some mysterious reason or other the Germans do not possess the comic spirit. It is, however, hardly philosophical to appeal to an ultimate fact before we have exhausted every other means of explanation. Before Rabelais and Molière, the French had given no commanding evidence in literature of a high comic faculty; yet we now know that it would have been a complete mistake to deny that this faculty existed. One cause of the poverty of Germany in comedy undoubtedly is, that she has hitherto had no great capital; for to the comic poet it is above all things essential that he should address a community with a delicate perception of what is just in social relations, and that he should have the opportunity of studying many different types of those who depart from the golden mean in feeling and action. Lessing understood this perfectly. "Our German comedy," he says, "is too provincial; we lack the great capital which France has, where more varied manners, more lively characters, more exciting situations may be found."

In the following passage he touches a circumstance which affected not only comedy, but the entire literature of Germany in his time:—"The most that we Germans yet possess in literature are the attempts of young people.

The prejudice that it only befits young people to work in this field is almost universal. Men, it is said, have more serious studies or weightier business to which Church or State gives occasion. Verses and comedies are considered an amusement, not altogether useless exercises, with which it is lawful to occupy oneself at most till one's five-and-twentieth year. So soon as we approach manhood we must devote all our energies to a useful office; and if this office leaves us leisure to write something, we must write nothing incompatible with its gravity and social rank; we must be content with a fine compendium out of the higher 'faculties,' a good chronicle of the dear native town, an edifying discourse, and the like. Hence it is that our literature has so few works which a thoughtful man takes up gladly, if to refresh and strengthen himself he wishes to think for once outside the uniform, tiresome circle of his daily occupations. What nourishment can such a man find, for example, in our thoroughly trivial comedies?"[1]

It is easy to be hard upon the defects of one's contemporaries; but few writers can turn round and frankly estimate their own qualities. This, however, Lessing does; and the passage in which he tells the world what to think of him as a poet is one of the most remarkable instances on record of a mind brushing aside the cobwebs of self-love in order to penetrate to the naked fact. "People often do me the honour to recognise me as a poet. But only because they do not understand me. They ought not to draw such generous conclusions from some dramatic attempts I have made. Not every one who takes the brush in hand and scatters colours is a painter. The oldest of these attempts were written in the years in which one so gladly takes pleasure and facility for genius. With respect to what is tolerable in my more recent efforts, I am conscious that I owe it solely to criticism. I do not feel in me the living fountain which works upwards by its own force, shoots up by its own force into such rich, such fresh such pure

[1] S. S. vii. p. 396.

streams; I must force everything out of me by the fly-press and pipes. I should be so poor, so cold, so short-sighted, if I had not to some extent learned modestly to borrow treasures from others, to warm myself at others' fires, and by the glasses of art to strengthen my eyes. I have, therefore, always felt ashamed and out of humour when I have read or heard anything to the disadvantage of criticism. It is said to hamper genius; and I flattered myself that I owed to it something which comes very near genius. I am a cripple whom a lampoon upon crutches cannot possibly edify." [1]

When we consider how anxious the average man of letters is to pass himself off for something greater than he really is, it is impossible not to be struck with admiration by this noble confession. The fame of a poet is the most beautiful, the most alluring, to which a writer can aspire, for none conveys a more delightful consciousness that its possessor is a true servant of humanity. Lessing enjoyed this fame: here he deliberately removes the bays from his brows, and lays them down as not lawfully his. It is common to speak of this as an act of humility; it was rather an act of lofty pride. Lessing was too great to claim what did not belong to him; he possessed so much that he could afford to give up what he thought he only seemed to possess.

That he was not a poet of the highest rank every impartial reader of his dramas will admit. They lack that spontaneity, that absolute freedom of movement, which is the note of the greatest art. His characters have life, but only so much as he has deliberately endowed them with; they do not suggest a world below and behind that which exists on the surface. And it is but rarely that his words, by one of those sudden strokes which are common in every supreme poet, reveal as by a lightning flash the strange and unsuspected deeps of the human spirit.

But although not a poet of the foremost class, Lessing

[1] S. S. vii. p. 416.

does himself extreme injustice in altogether disclaiming poetical merit. As Goethe generously said, his works are the best witness against himself. If he had been no more than a critic, his dramas would long ago have been forgotten. As a matter of fact, they are inwrought into the intellectual life of his nation. Only Goethe and Schiller have conceived characters which have made a profounder impression; and it may be doubted whether in wealth and seriousness of thought any creation of the latter can be said to surpass "Nathan." It is true that without criticism the spark of the divine fire in Lessing would probably never have kindled into flame; but criticism alone would not have enabled him to produce the effects of genius. His insight as a critic was to a large extent due to the study of his own intellectual processes as a poet.[1]

VIII.

When Lessing began his work as critic of the National Theatre, it was intended that he should devote as much attention to the manner in which the plays were represented as to the plays themselves. No one ever studied more carefully than he the actor's art, and it will be remembered that he at one time announced his intention of publishing a work on the subject, and actually did make some preparations for the task. This part of his duty, then, he probably looked forward to with particular pleasure; and in the statement he issued on the day of the opening of the theatre he clearly indicated the spirit in which he proposed to discharge it. "The greatest delicacy of a dramatic critic is shown when he knows infallibly in every case, both of satisfaction and dissatisfaction, how to distinguish what is due to the poet and what to the actor. To blame the one for something in which the

[1] For an accurate and suggestive definition of Lessing's position as a poet see a paper on "Nathan the Wise" in "The Unseen World and other Essays," by J. Fiske (Boston).

other has erred is to spoil both. The courage of the former is taken away, and the latter is made to feel too confident. The actor especially has a right to demand that in this respect the greatest strictness and impartiality shall be observed. The justification of the poet may be at any time undertaken; his work remains, and may be again and again studied. But the actor's art is in its nature transitory. Both his good and bad achievements rush quickly past; and it is often due rather to the humour of the spectator than to himself that at one time the good, at another time the bad, make the more lively impression. A beautiful figure, a charming mien, a sparkling eye, an enchanting step, a lovely tone, a melodious voice: these are things which cannot well be expressed by words. But they are neither the sole nor the greatest perfections of the actor. Precious gifts of nature, very necessary to his vocation, but by no means all that he needs for his vocation! Everywhere he must think with the poet: when the poet has been untrue to any human quality, the actor must think for him."[1]

For some time Lessing faithfully recorded his impressions of the acting, but as he gave great offence to an actress by too cordially praising one of her rivals, and by delicately suggesting that notwithstanding her ability she herself was not adapted to parts of every kind, he was obliged after a few weeks to restrict himself to literary criticism.

An actor who, after the National Theatre came to an end, acquired great fame in Hamburg—Schröder—did not agree with many of Lessing's judgments, and thus accounted for what he deemed his mistakes. "Lessing was never able to devote his attention to an entire performance; he would go away and come back, talk with acquaintances, or give himself up to thought; and from traits which excited his passing pleasure he would form a picture that belonged rather to his own mind than to the reality."[2] There is probably a good deal of truth in this; but Lessing's criticisms

[1] S. S. vii. p. 5.

[2] Guhrauer, (1) p. 147.

prove that he knew by a glance how to detect what was really important in an actor's style. It is to be noted that he never went into the theatre with very lofty anticipations. "One must," he says,[1] "be satisfied with the representation of a piece if among four or five persons some have played excellently, the others well. A man whom a beginner or a makeshift so much offends in the small parts that he turns up his nose at the whole, should go to Utopia and visit the perfect theatre there, where even the man who attends to the lights is a Garrick."

In his "Theatrical Library," Lessing stated the principle that the actor produces his effects not so much by actually feeling the passions he represents as by faithfully displaying the outward signs by which these passions are expressed. In the "Dramaturgie" this is the foundation of his criticism of the actors. He maintains that of two actors—one who has the feelings to be represented, but whose countenance, movements, and tone are not in harmony with them, another who has not the feelings, but who has learned to imitate quickly and exactly their various manifestations—the latter would be by far the better fitted for the stage. This principle he asserts while discussing the best mode of giving utterance to those sententious sayings in which the dramatists of the time delighted. His conclusion on this point is that, as a truth of general application, a maxim requires to be spoken with a certain degree of calmness; but, as a truth which is based upon a multitude of individual experiences, it also demands that the actor shall display in uttering it some fire and enthusiasm. Both must be combined; but according to the situation now one, now another of the two elements will predominate. If the character wishes by means of a general truth to moderate passion, he will deliver it as deliberately as possible, and he will force himself into a position of repose, "as if not to disturb himself in hearing himself." Only on the countenance, which cannot be so quickly con-

[1] S. S. vii. p. 13.

trolled, there will still be traces of the stir and heat of feeling. If his aim is to rouse himself to more decided action, the features will be without trace of excitement, but the general truth will be asserted with an energy that will reveal itself in the movements of the rest of the body, particularly the hands. Lessing dwells at some length on the necessity of controlling the hands, every change in the position of which, in the delivery of general truths, ought to have some meaning.

The discussion was suggested by the acting of Eckhof, by far the most distinguished member of the troupe: a man of sterling character, enthusiastic in his profession, and so impressive in many of his great parts that he was sometimes called the German Garrick. He was the first German who made a serious attempt to raise the calling of an actor in the esteem of the world, and at one time started a society for the systematic study of the craft. Lessing repeatedly refers to him, and always in a tone of the highest respect.

That even in extreme passion the actor should maintain a certain moderation is one of Lessing's most important principles; and in support of it he quotes Hamlet's advice to the players. "If Shakespeare was not in practice so great an actor as he was a dramatic poet, he at any rate knew what is appropriate to the one art as well as what is appropriate to the other. Perhaps, in regard to the former, he had thought all the more deeply as he had so much less genius for it. At any rate, every word put into the mouth of Hamlet when he instructs the players is a golden rule for all actors who seek for rational applause."[1] The reason why extravagant expressions of feeling are to be avoided, says Lessing, evidently thinking of the leading principles of the "Laokoon," is that they are incompatible with beauty; and the actor cannot afford to neglect the claims of beauty, since his craft stands midway between art and poetry. "As visible painting, its highest

[1] S. S. vii. p. 25.

aim must be beauty; yet as transitory painting, it does not always need to give its positions that repose which makes the ancient works of art so impressive. Sometimes it may, it must, allow itself the fury of a Tempesta, the rage of a Bernini. Only, the actor must not dwell on this too long. He must prepare the way for it by previous movements, and by that which follows again pass into a dignified tone; he must never give to passion all the intensity it may receive from the poet. For acting is, indeed, dumb poetry, but it must make itself immediately intelligible to the eye, and every sense must be gratified if it is to hand on to us in their purity the ideas which it is expected to pass into the mind."[1]

He refers to the custom some actors have of raising their voices and displaying unwonted energy, whether it is appropriate or not, at the end of a scene, in order to win the applause of the gallery. "Such an actor should be hissed; but the audience is partly too ignorant, partly too good-natured, to do this, and takes the will to please for the deed."[2]

Had Lessing had his way, actors would have had no temptation to rant for the sake of applause; for he highly disapproved of breaking the illusion by noisy manifestations of pleasure, and never set the example of applauding even what he liked. This, it need hardly be said, was not a characteristic which commended itself to the actors.

He highly praises one of the actors for taking with equal willingness the parts of old and young men. "This proves his love for his art; and the connoisseur at once distinguishes him from so many other young actors, who always wish to shine upon the stage, and whose petty vanity in causing themselves to be stared at and admired in gallant and amiable parts is their chief, often their only, qualification for the theatre."[3]

In a passage of admirable criticism Lessing contrasts the

[1] S. S. vii. p. 26. [2] S. S. vii. p. 27. [3] S. S. vii. p. 84.

necessity of conforming to "time" in music with the varied emphasis which ought to be placed on the different members of a sentence, and highly praises an actress for her constant change of tone in accordance with the ideas and feelings to be expressed. Only in the intense accentuation of particular words did she fail: a peculiar kind of effect in which she had something to learn from Eckhof.

The smallest effect of genuine art did not escape Lessing's notice. For instance: "When Eckhof at the end of the piece says of Mericourt, 'I will give him as much as will enable him to live in the great world which is his fatherland, but I shall never see him more,' who taught the man, with a pair of raised fingers moved hither and thither, and a single shake of the head, to show us at once what kind of a land Mericourt's fatherland is? A dangerous, an evil land! *Tot linguæ, quot membra viro!*"[1] Again: "Madame Heuseln (as Sara in 'Miss Sara Sampson') died with uncommon dignity, in the most picturesque position; and especially one trait took me by surprise. It has been remarked that the dying begin to pluck with their fingers at their clothes or beds. This observation she made use of in the most successful manner. At the moment when her soul was passing from her, a mild spasm suddenly expressed itself, but only in the fingers of the stiffened arm; she caught her dress, which was raised a little and immediately sank again: the last flicker of a light about to be extinguished, the last ray of a setting sun."[2]

Two extremely interesting articles treat of the music which ought to introduce the performance and be played between the acts. Lessing argues that it should be in complete harmony with the piece, and prepare the minds of the spectators for the scenes that are to follow. To some slight extent he would have the orchestra take the place of the chorus in the Greek drama.

[1] S. S. vii. p. 87. [2] S. S. vii. p. 60.

IX.

No work Lessing had hitherto written attracted so much attention as the "Dramaturgie." The public, which had been taught to look upon French tragedy as the loftiest achievement of human genius, were astonished to find that, in the opinion of the greatest living critic, it violated all the most essential principles of dramatic art. An enthusiastic young man sent the work to Voltaire, with a request that he would answer it. "Sir," replied Voltaire, with good-humoured irony, "I am too old to learn German in order to understand my opponent. You tell me that Herr Lessing's papers are well written. Indeed, if he writes German as well as you write French, they must be quite excellent."[1] When Lessing went to Leipzig in 1768, his friend Weisse was from home, and it was rumoured that he had gone away in order to avoid meeting one who had handled his "Richard III." so severely. He wrote to Lessing, assuring his "first and oldest friend" that this was entirely untrue. "I should be unworthy to be criticised by you if I thought so meanly. With pleasure I give up to you all my theatrical trifles, and a friend like you is dearer to me than all I have written." In a letter to Garve, however, he expressed disapproval of Lessing's method of criticism, maintaining that "an Englishman should be judged in London, a Frenchman in Paris," and that the only true test of a play is the effect it produces in the theatre. "Had Lessing," he added, "plied his scourge in regard to my first attempts, I should never again have printed a line, and since he has pulled down everything I have lost the courage for farther efforts."[2] For the future he avoided tragedy, but acquired considerable fame as a writer of slight operatic pieces.

The attack on Corneille, Racine, and their followers was almost too successful, for while the "Dramaturgie" was in progress a cry was raised in various journals that art has

[1] Guhrauer, (1) p. 213. [2] Guhrauer, (1) p. 214.

no laws, and that genius can be true to itself only when altogether left to its own devices. Those who took up this position denounced Lessing's criticism as discouraging to original impulse, and exclaimed that "the stage must be reformed by examples, not by rules." "As if genius," he retorted, "allowed itself to be depressed by anything in the world! And by that too which, as they themselves admit, is deduced from its products. Not every critic is a man of genius; but every man of genius is a born critic. He has in himself the test of all rules." In the concluding number, in which he denies to himself the honours of a poet, he protests strongly against the idea that "every one must discover art anew for himself:" an error which appeared to him hardly less dangerous than the doctrine that nothing important could be done in the drama except by absolute submission to French guidance. It was, however, impossible to stop a movement which had its origin in the deepest tendencies of the time. Men of the younger generation, in giving up allegiance to French ideals, fancied they had nothing to do but to riot in wild freedom. "Nature" was constantly on their lips; and, oddly enough, Shakespeare was taken as the type of glorious lawlessness.[1] But time brought about its revenge, for the day came when the two greatest poets of Germany, Goethe and Schiller—although both, especially the latter, profited largely by the "Dramaturgie"—thought it no dishonour to translate Racine and Voltaire. Then, however, Lessing's work, so far as the drama was concerned, had been done. He had delivered his countrymen from a degrading yoke, and when their liberty was assured there was no reason why they should not do full justice to

[1] Next to Shakespeare Ossian was the god of their idolatry. It is noteworthy that, notwithstanding his preference for classical culture, Lessing was far from sharing Dr. Johnson's opinion of Ossian. "Une traduction françoise de cet ouvrage seroit certainement *insupportable*," wrote a French critic in the *Journal Encyclopédique*. "So much the worse for the French!" is Lessing's comment in one of the notes of his "Collectanea." S. S. xi. (1), p. 380.

their former masters. He had also taught the few who had ears to hear that the greatest dramatic work will be produced by those who devote to it high and serious effort, and who, while maintaining living contact with the world and mainly looking within for strength and impulse, nourish imagination by familiarity with the most splendid achievements of past ages.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE CONTROVERSY WITH KLOTZ.

I.

THE quarrels of authors do not form an edifying chapter in literary history, and if Lessing's controversy with Klotz had been no more than an ordinary quarrel, it would not be worth while to recall it now. It was, however, very much more, for it sprang from one of the deepest motives of his career: his desire to foster the intellectual life of his nation by mercilessly sweeping aside whatever tended to hamper its growth.

Klotz was still a young man, being about nine years Lessing's junior. He also was a Lusatian, and being a man of ambitious, pushing nature, not without talent, he had risen rapidly to a prominent position among the scholars and literary men of the day. At the age of twenty-four he was professor at Göttingen, and soon afterwards he accepted a call to Halle, where he was able to live in a style very unusual among the learned of that time. Heine gives an amusing picture of the imposing grandeur of A. W. Schlegel at Bonn: his delicate kid gloves, the liveried servant who attended to the wax lights while the great man lectured, the occasional pompous references to "my friend the Lord High Chancellor of England." Klotz seems to have been in matters of this kind a predecessor of Heine's *bête noire*. He was favourably known even in the highest quarters. When he was invited to transfer his services to Warsaw,

Frederick, who was not often so liberal to professors, persuaded him to remain by not only raising his salary, but conferring on him the title of Geheimrath. Klotz thereupon assumed the manners of one who was familiar with the great world, and he enjoyed the reputation of knowing a vast deal more than his neighbours even about "Cabinet secrets."

As a lecturer he achieved no success: it was by writing that he acquired his fame. Not that he wrote anything of much importance; but he kept his name constantly before the public, and he is said to have been master of a very pure and vigorous Latin style. He edited two literary journals, the "Acta Literaria," which was written in Latin, and the "Halle Journal for Scholars," which appeared in German. He had many contributors, who accepted the word of command from him with docility, and were never tired of sounding his praises. Even great scholars like Heyne professed the deepest respect for his attainments; and the kind-hearted Gleim was more than usually effusive in his utterances of admiration and friendship. It was somewhat dangerous to offend him, for there was nothing he would not do to injure an enemy. He did not hesitate, in criticising men who were known to the public only through their writings, to go into minute details of private life, sometimes wounding them by the most injurious and insulting statements.

While Lessing was in Breslau, he was rather less familiar than he had previously been with the movements of the literary world; and being ignorant of Klotz's real character, he made a complimentary allusion to him in one of the notes to "Laokoon" as "a man of just and fine taste." Klotz was delighted by this mark of recognition from so great and famous an author, and shortly after "Laokoon" appeared wrote to him in an extremely flattering tone, expressing gratitude for the pleasure the work had given him, and formally asking permission to jot down in the "Acta Literaria" some few objections which had

occurred to him. Lessing was not very favourably impressed by this letter, but a month after receiving it sent a courteous answer, responding to Klotz's expressions of good-will, and of course not withholding the desired permission. In six months a review appeared, full of extravagant praise, but at the same time containing a good many criticisms. Klotz at once sent it to Lessing, with a second letter quite as flattering as the first. Lessing, however, was displeased equally by the praise and blame of his critic, threw the review aside, and left the letter unanswered.

Klotz felt deeply injured by this cool treatment, to which he had not been accustomed. For a time, however, he nursed his wrath in silence: perhaps afraid to attack one whose powers in controversy were so well known, or not seeing an opportunity of taking back the praises he had so freely poured forth. He was not the less determined to obtain revenge when the proper moment should arrive.

There was not a single important literary man whose acquaintance he had not sought; and amongst others Nicolai was well known to him. He even contributed occasionally to Nicolai's "Library." By-and-by an article appeared in this periodical attacking two little volumes of his, entitled "Opuscula" and "Carmina Omnia." He could not at once express his indignation, but ultimately he started, in addition to the two periodicals he already edited, a third with the same title as Nicolai's and designed to supplant it. The pretence was that a critical school had arisen in Berlin which was weighing oppressively upon original talent, and that it was necessary to counteract its injurious influence by encouraging genius. The prominent members of this school were Nicolai, Mendelssohn, and Ramler. Klotz knew very well that Lessing now stood in no kind of literary relation to these writers; but it suited his purpose to give out that the author of "Laokoon" was the real head of the party, and that without his inspiration it could

effect nothing. A number of writers who would not scruple to obey orders were secured for the new journal; and Klotz persuaded one of his friends and followers, Riedel, a young professor at Erfurt, to found a periodical in that town having the same objects.

The first number of Klotz's "Library" appeared early in 1768; and the second was "so pitiful," as Lessing said in a letter to Nicolai,[1] "that he promised the wind-bag a very brief duration." The review of a collection of German songs edited by Ramler excited his indignation much more than anything that could have been said of himself. "What is Ramler about?" he asks Nicolai. "I have not yet written to him; but before he can look about him I shall have written for him. The young gentlemen have gone a little too far in connection with 'The Songs of the Germans.' I must see whether I cannot write another little 'Literary Letter.'"

When Lessing went to Leipzig in the spring of 1768, it occurred to him that he would visit Klotz at Halle on his way back to Hamburg, in order to understand fully what kind of person he had to deal with: in the hope, it may be, that a writer who had undoubted ability might be brought to use it for worthier ends. But in Leipzig he learned so much about the man—his colossal vanity, and his malignity in seeking by all sorts of mean devices the ruin of those who offended him—that he lost all desire even to see him. Another cause of offence was that just then a book on engraved gems by Klotz appeared, in which Lessing was several times referred to in a manner that deeply displeased him. Instead, therefore, of visiting Klotz, he returned to Hamburg, resolved to put the public on its guard against a pedant who was apparently about to do a vast amount of mischief. It would be wholly to misunderstand Lessing to suppose that he determined to take this course for purely personal reasons. He had too much self-respect to defend himself against every assailant; but it

[1] Sämmtliche Schriften, xii. p. 225.

was of high importance to him that the nation should not be misled by charlatans, that in the world of learning as in that of poetry shallowness and pretence should be displaced by a true ideal.

He issued what he called, in writing to Nicolai, his declaration of war against Klotz, in the form of a letter to the Hamburg papers, nominally in reply to an article in which a reviewer had asserted with evident eagerness that Klotz had convicted Lessing of "an unpardonable error." The "error" was a supposed assertion in "Laokoon," that ancient painters found few subjects for their art in Homer. Lessing had no difficulty in showing that he had made no such assertion; that he had only declared that in choosing Homeric themes ancient painters did not attempt to represent exactly what the poet described, but adapted his ideas to the requirements of their special art; that the examples by which Klotz had professed to set him right he had himself adduced. In subsequent letters he takes Klotz's remaining objections, and easily proves that they arise either from misunderstanding of his meaning or from ignorance. Klotz, for example, had maintained that there would be no such difficulty "in painting the Homeric fables" as had been described in "Laokoon." Lessing recalls one of his main positions—that Homer describes invisible beings and actions, as well as visible—and simply asks Klotz to say in what manner the former can be rendered in painting. And if they cannot be so rendered, by what means shall the artist indicate the proportions which Homer ascribes to the gods and goddesses? Lastly, how is he to present through co-existing forms the progressive pictures in which Homer delights? Klotz had censured Lessing for saying that the expression of the old men who admire Helen's beauty, as described by Homer, is repulsive; but he shows that he had said no such thing, but only that their expression, if painted as Count Caylus advised, would be repulsive. The statement that ancient art did not represent Furies, Klotz had met by citing an

engraved gem on which, he maintained, was the image of a Fury. Lessing disputes this interpretation of the gem; but in any case he refers to a passage in which he had distinctly excluded gems from his general observation. In answer to Riedel, Klotz's friend, of whom Lessing here speaks respectfully as one "who promises to be a striking thinker," he indicates that his opinion on this point cannot be disposed of by bringing forward actual instances of statues of Furies, since he had not denied that such statues were used in the service of religion. He had only questioned whether they were ever created when the sculptor worked solely in the interests of art.

Having replied to every charge brought against him by Klotz, Lessing turns to the book in which the charges had been made, and in letter after letter, written not with his customary play of humour, but in a tone of severe irony, reveals to scholars and the general community the real nature and acquirements of the man they had honoured, who had presumed to trail in the dust the most distinguished names, who aspired to dictate to the nation that which in the realm of thought and research it should admire and hate. The letters were written with extraordinary rapidity, and in the autumn of 1768 they were published as a separate volume with the title, "Letters on Antiquarian Subjects" ("Briefe, antiquarischen Inhalts"). A second volume appeared in the following year. Lessing made careful preparations for a third; but Klotz suddenly died, and the scheme was ultimately given up. From the notes which were published after Lessing's death, it appears that in the third volume he was to deal largely with Riedel as well as Klotz, the former having forfeited his good opinion by writing in the lax and defiant style of his chief.

Lessing had no particular love for engraved gems. He believed, indeed, that, on the whole, from the minuteness of their designs, they are apt to have an injurious influence on serious art. And in antiquarian studies generally, for their own sake, he found little to interest him. "I value," he

wrote to Mendelssohn, "the study of antiquities precisely as much as it is worth: one hobby-horse the more for shortening the journey of life. One so soon comes to an end of the studies essential to our true improvement that time hangs heavily on one's hands." Yet with the whole subject of Klotz's book—which is too technical to be discussed here—he displays a familiarity that could have been surpassed by no scholar of his day. From point to point he moves with the assured step of a master, lending, as is his wont, an incommunicable charm to discussions which merely technical writers do not even affect to make interesting. The general result, so far as Klotz was concerned, was that, although he claimed the honours of an original investigator, he had done no more than appropriate the fruits of other men's labours; that he had constantly misread his authorities; that his inaccuracy in regard to facts, and the general looseness of his mode of thought, rendered him utterly unfit, without farther discipline, to undertake the functions of a public teacher.

While the work was in progress Klotz wrote two brief answers, of a strictly personal nature, in a tone which he meant to be dignified and courteous. Lessing replies to these in the last six letters of the series; and never, not even in the "Vade Mecum for Herr S. G. Lange," had he expressed himself with so much severity. We feel throughout that he is determined not to let his opponent go until he has utterly destroyed him. In the letter in which Lessing had responded to Klotz's request for permission to review "Laokoon," he had used the phrase that he anticipated for the work "few readers and still fewer competent critics." Klotz quoted this passage with the evident design of convicting the writer of exorbitant self-conceit. Lessing answers with perfect calmness that the words are not so proud as they seem. There are, he explains, many who have more knowledge and greater penetration than he; but of these very few apply their penetration to such subjects as are treated of in "Laokoon," the general belief being

that poetry and art are simply to be enjoyed, not discussed. As for poets and artists themselves, it was "a thousand to one" whether he would have any of them for readers.[1] "It was never my intention to write immediately for the poet or for the painter. I write *about* them, not *for* them. They can do without me, but I cannot do without them. To express myself by a simile: I undo what the silkworms spin, not to teach the silkworms how to spin, but to make purses from the silk for myself and those like me; purses, to continue the simile, in which I collect the small coins of single observations, until I can change them into good weighty gold pieces of universal propositions, and apply them as capital for truths which I think out for myself."

Klotz had conveyed the impression that he had reviewed "Laokoon" at the request of the author. Lessing responds by quoting the letter which had been originally addressed to him, and with biting sarcasm gives his reasons for never having acknowledged the communication by which it was followed.[2] "His praises were extremely repulsive to me, because they were extremely exaggerated; and his objections I found utterly empty, notwithstanding the air of learning with which they were advanced. Of the former I would have been obliged to say to him: 'My most worthy sir, it is one thing to scatter incense before one, another—to speak with Wernicke—to throw the censer at one's head. I will believe that you *wished* to do the former; but the latter is what you *have* done. I will believe that it was merely your awkwardness in swinging the censer; but nevertheless I have bumps and feel them. It tickles me, indeed, to hear even from you that I have written a tolerably good little book. It tickles me, indeed, to see myself ranked by you among the ornaments of Germany; for who would not like to be at least no disgrace to his country? But now enough of tickling; for do you not see that I must already writhe more than I can laugh? Or do you think that my skin is an elephant's

[1] S. S. viii. p. 178. [2] S. S. viii. p. 181.

hide? That must be your opinion, for you fret it more and more, and will tickle me to death. You do not merely give me a place among the ornaments of Germany; you give me one of the first places, if not the very first. Not only do you give me this, you make the Muses give it to me, and will have it that the Muses gave it to me long ago. '*Cui dudum principem inter Germaniæ ornamenta locum Musæ tribuerunt.*' My most worthy sir, I am afraid of you. If you think this seriously, you certainly did not discover gunpowder. If you say it without believing a word of it, merely to stand well with me, you are a dishonest man. But it may be that you are neither so dishonest nor so simple: you may praise the cleft in the rock merely for the sake of the echo. You cut the morsel for your own throat, not for mine; what chokes me glides smoothly down with you. If that is so, my most worthy sir, I pity you for having come to the wrong quarter. The ball which I may not catch I may not throw back. You are perhaps more learned than I; but to include you therefore among the ornaments of Germany, to put you where you would put me: that I could not do if it were to cost me my life! If the Muses have already done it—I know nothing of that, and without more certain grounds I should not like to say such a thing of the Muses behind their backs. If the Muses do it in the future, that will please me; but let us be diligent and wait. The reward is at the goal; and one does not start in the race from the goal.'

"As to the second point, I should have been compelled to say to Herr Klotz: 'My most worthy sir, I find that you are a very well-read man, or at any rate you thoroughly understand how one can appear to be so. You may also have fine *collectánea*. I have nothing of this sort; I should not like to appear to have read a page more than I have really read; I often find, indeed, that I have already read far too much for the health of my understanding. Half of my life passed in learning what others had thought. Then it was about time that I should think

myself; or, if it was too late for that, that I should at least so arrange, adjust, and clear up what I had learned of others' thoughts that in case of need they might pass for my own. It does not seem that you are in the same position as I; it does not seem that you feel so urgently as I do the necessity of putting things in order in your head; you still collect, while I throw away what I have collected. I recognise with thanks that you wish to be so busy and serviceable about me; but observe, my most worthy sir, that you give me almost exclusively things which I had already in my book put in their proper places. Much you give me as something quite different from what it really is. Generally you misunderstand my object; you linger over incidental explanations, and pass by the main thing. I might like to have you by me as a living index. You would not let me be at a loss as to the proper numbers of pages; only, the thoughts I should myself have to look after. I should even have to verify the numbers of the pages after you, for often the index says something quite different from the book. In you I promised myself a man who would think with me, and I find one who wishes to consult authorities and look through books of engravings for me. If that pleases you, your feats of memory are quite justified; but what my book is intended to prove and explain, it proves and explains not a hair the less on their account.'"

It is worth mentioning, in regard to the gibe about *collectanea* in this passage, that far from "having nothing of this sort," Lessing had a splendid collection of them, begun before he left Berlin but written chiefly in Hamburg. They afford the best proof that notwithstanding his many anxieties his reading was uninterrupted. They go over an immense range of topics; and it is clear that he meant to interweave many of the facts and suggestions contained in them with future treatises. His remark is, however, true in spirit, if not in the letter. The *collectanea* of men like

Klotz are a substitute for thought and genuine research; with men like Lessing they are only helps to both.

Klotz had ascribed Lessing's vehemence in attacking him to his indignation at the "Library" of Nicolai having found a competitor. Lessing explains that he has never had anything to do with the "Library," and proudly asserts the absolute independence of his position. Klotz and his friends had undertaken "to expose to the world a Berlin literary school, and to make him one of its founders." "This school is said to have been working in the journals which Herr Nicolai has carried on during the last twelve years, and to exercise the most intolerable despotism. Innumerable persons in Germany are said to be discontented with this despotism, and Herr Klotz is represented as having at last put himself at their head. Good luck to these enterprises and to all the chivalrous deeds resulting from them! But would that some friendly genius would open the eyes of these heroes, at least in regard to me! In truth I am only a windmill, not a giant. There I stand on my place, quite outside the village, alone upon my sandhill, and come to no one, and help no one, and let no one help me. If there is anything to grind between the millstones, I grind it, let the wind be what it may. All the thirty-two winds are my friends. Of the whole wide atmosphere I do not ask a finger-breadth more than my sails need for going round. Only, this amount of space must be left free to them. Midges may swarm among them, but audacious boys must not every moment run about under them, still less must a hand try to stop them which is not stronger than the wind that drives me round. Any one whom my sails sweep up into the air has himself to blame; I cannot let him down more gently than he falls." [1]

Lessing justifies his severity by giving an instance of the base uses to which Klotz had applied his power as the editor of various literary journals, degrading the public taste by vile scandal instead of elevating it by true criti-

[1] S. S. viii. p. 186.

cism. It had been said, however, that notwithstanding Klotz's offences he ought to have been treated with politeness. "Politeness, they say, is so pretty a thing. Certainly! for it is so small! But let it be as pretty as you will, politeness is not a duty; and its absence is far from implying brutality. On the other hand, for the good of the majority, candour is a duty; it is a duty even if there is a danger of being considered on account of it rude and ill-natured. If I were a critic, if I believed I was able to bear the critic's shield, this would be my scale: gentle and flattering to the beginner, towards the master admiringly cautious, cautiously admiring, deterrent and positive towards the bungler, contemptuous towards the boaster, and as bitter as possible to the slanderer."[1]

Only once does Lessing seem to lose control of himself, and precisely then he passes out of the range of our sympathies. This is when he accuses Klotz of having written of him as Magister Lessing in order to make him feel the gulf between a mere scholar and a Geheimrath. Even Klotz seems to have been incapable of this pettiness; and if he had been guilty of it, we should have preferred that Lessing had treated it as beneath notice.

Klotz at first gave out that he intended to write a complete answer to the "Antiquarian Letters;" but he by-and-by changed his tactics, and pretended not even to have read them. Weapons more easily wielded were close at hand, and with these he did as much damage as he could. Nowhere was the outcry against the "Dramaturgie" so loud as in his "Library;" and he did not scruple to injure his assailant by inserting little paragraphs in which Lessing was said to have his reasons for praising this actress or that.

The impression generally produced by the "Letters" may be gathered from some expressions used by Wieland in writing to Riedel, with whom he was at this time on very friendly terms. "If my advice has any weight with

[1] S. S. viii. p. 193.

you, take care not to come into conflict with Lessing, not because I suppose you would not come well out of the affair, but 'parcequ'il ne faut pas se donner en spectacle.' And then, it seems to me what Yorick says of the devil is true of Lessing: 'Resist the devil and he will flee from you, may be true, but it is safer to run from him as soon as he appears!'"[1]

Many scholars and writers, who had not dared to attack so unscrupulous an opponent as Klotz, were delighted at the chastisement inflicted upon him; but few had the courage to side openly with Lessing. And the opinion was very general that he had been somewhat too pitiless. "It was then," wrote Goethe in his "Wahrheit und Dichtung," "a beautiful time in literature, when distinguished men treated each other with respect, although the Klotz business and Lessing's answers already indicated that this epoch was about to be closed." Had Lessing written merely from personal pique, it would be impossible to justify the vigour of his onslaught; but if the theory here accepted be correct—that his desire was to destroy the authority of one who was gravely injuring the intellectual life of the nation—his attack needs no apology. It is true it would not now be lawful for a writer even of Lessing's power to annihilate in the same way even a second Klotz; but that is because we assume that pretence will not long be able to impose upon the cultivated European world. Such an assumption could not have been made, at least in Germany; in the middle of last century. A man like Klotz had it in his power to mislead thousands, and his influence could not be undermined except by a stern and determined enemy, who, while tender and respectful towards all sincere effort, loathed sham and loved to brand it with its right name. Besides, although Klotz is the hero of the "Antiquarian Letters," it is not he alone who is there pilloried. Like the "Vade Mecum for Herr S. G. Lange," the work treats rather of a type than of an

[1] Guhrauer, (1) p. 255.

individual. Klotz is but the representative of the class which talks much but thinks little, strives incessantly to give a small achievement the appearance of vast importance, and is impatient of every form of excellence that cannot be measured by received standards. Read in the light of this idea, the "Antiquarian Letters" are not likely for some time to lose their significance.

II.

Fortunately the "Antiquarian Letters" were not the sole result of the controversy with Klotz. It led to the publication of a work which, although of small compass, must always, on account of the beauty of its ideas and the charm of its style, rank as one of Lessing's masterpieces. It is entitled: "How the Ancients represented Death" ("Wie die Alten den Tod gebildet").

Count Caylus recommended to artists the passage in the "Iliad" in which Apollo delivers the body of Sarpedon to Sleep and Death. He expressed himself, however, at a loss as to the attributes with which Sleep should be endowed, so as to harmonise with the horrible figure of Death: thus indicating that in his opinion death was represented in ancient as in modern times by a skeleton. In a note to "Laokoon" Lessing opposed this view, which was then universally received; indeed, it had occurred to no one to doubt it. He referred to the chest in the temple of Hera at Elis, described by Pausanias, on which, among other figures, were Death and Sleep resting like children in the arms of Night.

Klotz, in his eagerness to convict Lessing of blunders, brought forward several instances of skeletons formed by ancient artists, and supposed that he had thereby triumphantly proved the received opinion. But Lessing had never meant to dispute that skeletons are to be found among the relics of ancient art; he was too familiar with every branch of antiquarian science to be ignorant of this fact. What he denied was that the skeleton was intended to figure death.

In this little treatise he does not waste many words on his opponent, but goes straight to the heart of his subject. As regards skeletons, his theory is that they were usually intended to represent *Larvæ:* that is, the souls of wicked men condemned to roam restlessly over the earth. In proof, he quotes from Seneca a passage which can hardly bear any other interpretation.[1] It was, therefore, natural that all skeletons formed by artists should receive the name of *Larvæ.* Hence also the skeleton placed on the table, in order, by reminding the guests that the time of happiness was brief, to stimulate them to the full enjoyment of the passing hour, was called *Larva.*

If, then, the skeleton did not represent death, what did? In endeavouring to answer this question, Lessing alludes to a Roman sarcophagus on which appears the figure of a youth standing with one foot crossed over the other, and leaning with his left arm on a reversed torch. Over it are the words "Somno Orestilia Filia," so that there can be no doubt as to its representing sleep. He then takes another sarcophagus, also Roman, on which a like figure, but winged, stands in a similar attitude beside the body of a dead man, with the reversed torch resting on the breast of the latter. On the left hand of the figure, which holds a garland, there is a butterfly. This figure, argues Lessing, cannot be the guardian genius of the dead man, for the guardian genius did not wait for death to take its departure. The idea before his time was that it represented Amor; but besides the fact that a god dared not look upon death, how could Amor have a reversed torch, which signified the extinction of the passions? This would have been to make his attributes conflict with his character. Clearly the figure is the twin brother of Sleep: Death, or the genius of death. In both cases the torch is appropriate, for in sleep the passions are temporarily, in death for ever, at rest. It is right that Death should have

[1] "Nemo tam puer est ut Cerberum timeat, et tenebras, et Larvarum habitum nudis ossibus cohærentium." —Epist. xxiv.

wings, since his approach is more sudden, his passage quicker, than that of Sleep. The garland is in accordance with the custom which prevailed among both Greeks and Romans of placing wreaths on the dead; and the butterfly is the well-known symbol of the soul, especially the soul which has said farewell to the body.

Thus provided with a key, Lessing brings forward several ancient works, on one of which is a figure essentially like those just mentioned, and on each of the others two similar figures, exactly corresponding to one another. The general conclusion is, that "the ancients represented Death like Sleep, Sleep like Death, now singly, now together, at one time without, at another with certain emblems." [1]

All the works cited are Roman, but Lessing argues without hesitation from them to the Greek custom, apparently on the ground that their resemblance to the work described by Pausanias indicates that the idea passed from Greece to Rome. He asserts, as a general principle, that when once a type was settled, the ancients did not lightly depart from it. Here, as elsewhere, however, according to the ideas of his time, he passes too readily from the Romans to the Greeks, almost as if they had been a single people, and had been moulded by the same influences.

It was not only confidently assumed, before the appearance of this admirable little treatise, that a skeleton represented death among the ancients, but Spence had argued that their figure of death could not but be horrible, since they had necessarily a much more fearful idea of death than prevails among those who accept the Christian faith. His reasoning, Lessing maintains, ought to have been exactly the reverse, because it is the Christian faith which, by representing death as the penalty of sin, has made it dreadful. "There have been philosophers who have considered life a penalty, but that death is a penalty could not, without revelation, have entered the thoughts of any man who merely exercised his reason." "As, however," he con-

[1] S. S. viii. p. 229.

cludes, "the Christian religion has not revealed this terrible truth for our despair, as it assures us that the death of the pious cannot be other than gentle and peaceful, I do not see what is to prevent our artists from giving up the frightful skeleton, and putting us again in possession of that better image. The Scripture itself speaks of the Angel of Death; and what artist would not rather create an angel than a skeleton? Only misunderstood religion can withdraw us from the beautiful; and it is an evidence in favour of the true religion, properly understood, if it everywhere brings us back to the beautiful."[1]

The concluding words indicate clearly how Lessing had been led to enter upon this investigation. One of the fundamental doctrines of "Laokoon," as we have seen, is that beauty was the highest law of ancient art; and this very naturally suggested a doubt whether even death could have been rendered by a repulsive image.

The effect produced by the work was deep and instantaneous. "Most of all," says Goethe in the passage already quoted, recalling his early impressions of "Laokoon," "were we enchanted with the beauty of the thought that the ancients represented Death as the brother of Sleep, and that each was formed like the other. Now for the first time we could joyfully celebrate the triumph of the beautiful, and in the realm of art confine the hateful of every kind, since it is not to be at once driven out of the world, to the lower sphere of the comic." German art no longer imaged Death in the old way; and in a well-known stanza of "Die Götter Griechenlands" Schiller gave poetic expression to the result of Lessing's research:—

> "Damals trat kein grässliches Gerippe
> Vor das Bett des Sterbenden; ein Kuss
> Nahm das leichte Leben von der Lippe,
> Seine Fackel senkt ein Genius."[2]

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[1] S. S. viii. p. 248.

[2] That Death and Sleep are brothers has long been a favourite idea of English poets. Every one knows Shelley's lines:—

> "How wonderful is Death,
> Death and his brother Sleep."

Webster also writes:—

> "O thou soft natural Death that art joint twin
> To sweetest Slumber."

Herder, who also made the question the subject of a special treatise, maintained that all such figures as those adduced by Lessing represented Sleep alone, the Greeks and Romans having, he believed, conceived death only as an eternal sleep. This was to present the ancient idea of death as something even gentler and more alluring than the conception for which Lessing argued.

Neither view, however, can be accepted as expressing the whole truth. Later investigation has, indeed, confirmed the conclusion that death was not represented by means of a skeleton; and there is no reason to doubt that the genius with the reversed torch stands either for Sleep or Death. But there was no uniform type to which ancient artists felt themselves compelled to conform. Lessing himself points out that κήρ, the power of sudden and violent death, which was imaged on the very chest that contained the figure of Night with Death and Sleep in its arms, appeared as a woman with monstrous teeth and crooked nails. The genius of ordinary death was sometimes a bearded man; sometimes a winged, sometimes an unwinged, figure. Artists were at liberty to follow their own devices; but the subject seems to have been one which they did not often care to handle.[1]

Even if death had always been represented as Lessing supposed, it would have been a mistake to conclude that Christianity first made it a terror. For, in accordance with the principles of "Laokoon," it might well have happened that art, in interpreting a theme in itself dreadful, deliberately selected only that aspect of it which was capable of a particular kind of beautiful treatment. The Greek and Latin poets do not attempt to surround death with pleasing associations. Lessing, indeed, incidentally quotes from them a number of allusions to it which can hardly have been written without a shudder. The shadow of the invisible world which Chris-

[1] This is the conclusion of Julius Lessing, who has discussed the question in a monograph, "De Mortis apud veteres figura" (1866).

tianity has cast upon the visible has added solemnity, and it may be fearfulness, to the moment in which we are supposed to pass from the one to the other; but Greeks and Romans were not so very different from ourselves that they could think without awe of the stroke which was to lay them for ever low. If art is taken as the test, their feeling respecting the last agony must be considered far more serious than that which prevailed at the time when the skeleton reminded men of coming sorrow, for in the Dances of Death there is a grotesque humour that would have been altogether foreign to the countrymen even of Aristophanes and Terence.

CHAPTER XVII.

FROM HAMBURG TO WOLFENBÜTTEL.

I.

IF Lessing's private circumstances had been favourable, there were several reasons why he should feel more at home in Hamburg than in any town in which he had yet lived. A more independent and manly tone prevailed among the inhabitants of free cities than was possible in towns dominated by court traditions; and in Hamburg, which had many and far-reaching commercial relations with the outward world, there was a certain cosmopolitanism which exactly suited Lessing's temper. He mingled freely with all classes, and used to say that until he lived in Hamburg he never truly knew the wealth of the German language.

He was now in the full strength of manhood, enjoying as a rule excellent health. This, therefore, seems the proper place in which to say a few words as to his appearance and manner. He was rather above the middle size, with figure firmly built, rendered supple by regular exercise. He carried his head erect, and so independent was his bearing that strangers sometimes thought his manner one of indifference. "The young poet [Karl Lessing] is small and thin," wrote the poetess Karsch in a letter already quoted,[1] "less beautifully formed than his brother, but quite as volatile, quite as little flattering to those with whom he speaks, or rather, as little inclined to seek for friendship." In society he liked, however, Lessing was genial and frank. On his fine face, especially in his clear,

[1] Vol. i. p. 244.

dark blue eyes, there was an expression of strength, vivacity, and goodness. His hair, whose light brown colour was even at the time of his death but slightly touched with grey, was combed back from his forehead, and gathered behind, after the fashion of the day, in a hair-bag. Neither in dress nor habits was there a touch of eccentricity, yet his smallest acts bore the mark of a strongly individual nature. "When he came to me," wrote Nicolai a year or two after the present period to Herder, "as he usually did when he was in Berlin, on Wednesdays and Saturdays, I said to him I knew it was Lessing the instant he knocked at the outer door. He would not believe that his knock was so original, and asserted that in knocking he imitated now Moses, now his brother, now some one else; but as soon as he made himself heard, everybody in the room would exclaim, 'There comes Lessing!'" [1]

When he went to Hamburg he was everywhere recognised as one of the greatest writers Germany had produced, and his fame steadily increased. His presence, therefore, was regarded as shedding lustre upon the town, and the most cultivated families gladly received him as an honoured guest. He found true delight in the society thus opened to him; and here as everywhere he gave still more pleasure than he received. Full of vitality, quick in repartee, always giving a new turn to any conversation in which he joined, he brought life into the dullest company. Although a brilliant talker, he was not one of those whose notion of conversation is to speak incessantly, and to give no one else a chance of being heard; what he loved was that idea should clash with idea, and he encouraged others to give the freest and best utterance to their thoughts. He avoided questions which the company as a whole could not take pleasure in discussing; and when enough had been said, he preferred to pass into new fields. Klopstock, who ultimately settled in Hamburg, and who was now an occasional visitor there, moved in the same circles as

[1] Guhrauer, (2) p. 321.

Lessing, and they became very good friends. The sentimentalism and conceit of the one, however, formed a striking contrast to the simplicity and frank intelligence of the other. They sometimes played chess together; and it caused much amusement to the bystanders to watch the excitement and anger of Klopstock at any advantage gained over him by his cooler and more good-humoured antagonist. If any discussion at table interested Klopstock deeply, he would afterwards take Lessing aside and try to induce him to continue it until the subject was exhausted. Lessing did not like this, preferring to move about freely, and to refresh himself by contact with many minds.

He was as fond as ever of play. In one house where he was a frequent guest, he would often begin, even before dinner, a game at *ombre* with the hostess and another lady, both of whom seem to have liked it as well as himself. The guests would become impatient when the game prolonged itself beyond the dinner-hour. "Tous les gens d'esprit," Lessing would say, quoting Riccaut in "Minna," "aiment le jeu à la folie!"

The family with which he was most intimate was that of Herr König, a man of fine intelligence and high character, whom, in a note of introduction to Gleim, he once recommended as his special friend. He was a silk manufacturer, and had several factories in Vienna, whither he had often to go on business. Of his wife, Eva König, we shall hear much hereafter. Now it may suffice to say that she was bright and animated, gifted with womanly tact and graciousness, yet not without a touch of sarcasm, and that, although the mother of four children, she still had some of the freshness and charm of youth. She delighted in cultivated society, and for her sake, as much as her husband's, her house was a centre for many of the best and pleasantest people in Hamburg. No guest appeared more often than Lessing, or was more heartily welcomed.

When in 1769 König started on one of his journeys to Vienna, Lessing accompanied him a little way out of the

town. "I recommend my family to you," said König at parting. He suddenly died a few months afterwards in Venice, and it fell to Lessing to fulfil the last request of his friend in a very different manner from that in which it had been understood by either.

The clergy formed a very important part of the social world of Hamburg. At its head was Pastor Goeze, whose name was destined to be brought into close, and by no means enviable, association with that of Lessing. He was a man of imposing presence, not without learning, and prided himself on belonging to the straitest sect of Lutheran orthodoxy. He would hear nothing of the mild, if somewhat illogical, Rationalism of a section of his clerical brethren; fought with furious energy for the very letter of what he considered the true creed; denounced in the strongest language all who departed by a hair's-breadth from the position he himself occupied. Strangely enough, although the theatre was in his eyes an abomination, he liked Lessing so well that he repeatedly invited him to his house. At last Lessing went, and, to the astonishment of his friends, the two men pleased each other so well that the visit was often repeated. Mischievous people declared that the pastor's good wine afforded the explanation of this strange friendship. Lessing perfectly recognised that the spirit which animated the zealous champion of the narrowest form of the Christian faith would, under favourable conditions, have made him a most dangerous enemy to true intellectual freedom. But Goeze was thoroughly logical; and at a time when, among a large section of the clergy, logic counted for so little, this alone would have sufficed to win Lessing's good-will. It must also be remembered that the quality which made him a dramatist caused him to be interested in every original and strongly marked character. Goeze so far returned Lessing's good opinion that in a bitter controversy, in which about this time he became engaged, respecting the theatre, and in the course of which he

applied anything but mild epithets to dramatic writers, he expressly excluded the works of the author of "Miss Sara Sampson" from the general censure. This controversy aroused so much passion that the civil authorities ultimately interfered, and forbade the publication of any more pamphlets on the subject. Every one expected that Lessing would have a word to say in defence of the stage. He remained silent, however; and the popular impression was that he did not care to come forward as the opponent of his friend Goeze. But in reality the failure of the National Theatre had so disgusted him, that he had made up his mind to have nothing more to do with the drama.

Another Hamburg pastor, Alberti, was in all respects the opposite of Goeze. Of a mild and refined temper, his wish was to break down as far as possible the limits which separated Lutheranism from the popular philosophy of the day. As a man, if not as a thinker, he was much liked by Lessing, who often met him. This amiable clergyman came into deadly conflict with Goeze. He had long had serious objections to the use of the words, "Pour out Thy wrath upon the heathen," which occurred in the service for the annual fast-day; and in 1769 he and a brother pastor of like sympathies declared their intention of dropping the objectionable prayer, and carried out their purpose. Goeze was enraged, and preached and wrote with all his might against the heretics. One day, in a company in which Alberti and Lessing were present, the latter was rallied on the subject of his orthodox friend's zeal. To the amazement of everybody, he declared that he saw no reason why the prayer which Alberti so much disliked should be given up. "One must distinguish in this matter," he said; "then one will find in what sense one may or must so pray." "Here," exclaimed Alberti, "no distinction is of use, for in every respect it is horrible to offer such a prayer. Christ says, 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.'" "That," Lessing answered, "we should and will do, and yet may well call down God's

wrath on those who deserve it." "I should like to see the distinction with which you will reconcile the two things." "You shall see it." Alberti and his friends laughed; but a few days afterwards Lessing put into his hands a proof sheet which considerably perplexed him. It was entitled: "A Sermon on Two Texts, Psalm lxxix. 6, 'Pour out Thy wrath upon the heathen,' and Matt. xxii. 39, 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.' By Yorick. Translated from the English." Lessing enjoyed his confusion for a moment—for Alberti would have dreaded his opposition far more than Goeze's—and then laughingly explained that the "sermon" was merely a fragment which he had printed as a joke, and which he had no intention of publishing.

Nicolai, who received a copy, long afterwards declared that it was a "masterpiece." Unfortunately, he had lost it, but he gave the following from memory as the introduction:—

"Colonel[1] Shandy went one day for a walk with his faithful Trim. They found on the way a lean man in a ragged French uniform, who supported himself on a crutch because one foot was maimed. Silently and with eyes cast down he took off his hat; but his sorrowful glance spoke for him. The colonel gave him some shillings without counting how many; Trim took a penny from his pocket, and in giving it said, 'French dog!' The colonel was silent some seconds, and then said, turning to Trim: 'Trim, he is a man and not a dog.' The French invalid had limped after them. After the colonel's words Trim gave him another penny, and said again, 'French dog!' 'And, Trim, this man is a soldier!' Trim looked him straight in the face, again gave him a penny, and said, 'French dog!' 'And, Trim, he is a brave soldier; you see he has fought for his country and been severely wounded.' Trim pressed his hand while he gave him

[1] Nicolai—perhaps Lessing also—forgot that Uncle Toby never rose beyond the dignity of a captain.

another penny, and said, 'French dog!' 'And, Trim, this soldier is a good and unfortunate husband; has a wife and four children.' Trim, a tear in his eye, gave everything he had in his pocket, and said, rather lightly, 'French dog!' When the colonel came home he spoke to Yorick about this incident. Yorick said, 'It is clear Trim hates the whole nation, which is the enemy of his country; but he can love any individual in it who deserves love.' This gave occasion to Yorick to deliver the following sermon."[1]

It is a pity that a sermon thus begun was left unfinished. It could not have failed to reveal how completely Lessing had raised himself above the passing disputes of theological partisans.

The fragment would have been interesting, if for nothing else, on account of the light it throws on Lessing's feeling for Sterne. "Tristram Shandy" had no more ardent admirer than he, either in Germany or elsewhere. With all his dislike of sentimentalism and his still deeper dislike of prurient innuendo, he penetrated at once to the keen and shining genius which gives both "Tristram Shandy" and "The Sentimental Journey" their unique rank in European literature. In a passage referring to Winckelmann's death, already quoted, Lessing said that this was the second author who had recently died to whom he would willingly have given two years of his life. The other was Sterne.

II.

We have seen how passionately Lessing longed to go to Rome, to remain there at least for a year, and, if possible, for ever. As the time he had fixed for his departure approached, however, it became obvious that this pleasure was still beyond his reach. If there had been no other reason for giving up the scheme, his pecuniary difficulties

[1] Sämmtliche Schriften, viii. p. 405.

would have compelled him to remain in Germany. He was deep in debt, and had but little hope of speedily working his way to freedom.

For a time he was buoyed up by expectations which were shared by several of the most prominent writers of the day. These expectations were aroused by a scheme which Klopstock had been able, through the Imperial ambassador at Copenhagen, to submit to the young and energetic Emperor Joseph II. All the world knew how largely this sovereign, whose history forms one of the most pathetic records of the eighteenth century, was influenced by the characteristic ideas of the time; and it occurred to Klopstock that, if the suggestion were made to him, the German literary world might find in him the patron whom it had long sought in vain. The proposal ultimately brought to his notice—in the form of a narrative supposed to be written in the nineteenth century, giving an account of what had been done in Vienna in the eighteenth for science and letters—was that an Academy should be founded, including the most famous authors of the Empire. A great State theatre was also to be established, with Lessing as one of two directors. The Emperor—to whom about the same time Klopstock dedicated one of his works in terms of glowing enthusiasm—received the proposal graciously, and all sorts of rumours were spread abroad as to the future he was about to open. The most extravagant reports appeared to be confirmed by the response to the dedication, for Klopstock received a miniature portrait of the Emperor set in brilliants.

The Berlin literary circles, jealous of a scheme which threatened to give new importance to Vienna, professed themselves extremely incredulous; and Nicolai wrote to Lessing, mentioning that according to Gleim the only motive of those who were acting in the matter in Vienna was a hope that if prominent writers were induced to settle there, the sale of their works would bring money into the country. Mendelssohn's latest and best work, "Phaedon,"

had recently been confiscated in the Austrian capital. How, asked Nicolai, was it possible that anything should be done for the intellectual interests of the nation in a country so completely dominated by the priests? Lessing, whose dislike of Berlin had become more and more intense, could not bear that it should be favourably contrasted with Vienna. "What Gleim," he answered,[1] "has told you of Vienna is wholly groundless; but he has doubtless wished to talk of the project in Vienna in the only manner that would be to the general taste in Berlin. Let Vienna be what it will, I promise for German literature much better fortune there than in your Frenchified Berlin. If the 'Phaedon' was confiscated in Vienna, it must have been because it was printed in Berlin, and nobody could imagine that any one there would defend the immortality of the soul. Do not talk to me of your Berlin freedom of thinking and writing. It reduces itself solely to the freedom of publishing as many fooleries against religion as one likes. And the honest man must feel ashamed to make use of this freedom. But let anybody once try in Berlin to write as freely about other things as Sonnenfels has written in Vienna; let anybody try to tell the truth to the polite court mob as he has told it to them; let some one come forward in Berlin who will raise his voice for the rights of the subject and against oppression and despotism, as is now done even in France and Denmark: and you will soon learn what country is to the present day the most enslaved country in Europe."

After all, the view accepted in Berlin proved to be correct. Maria Theresa, who retained in her own hands all real authority, was too good a Catholic to favour a proposal which would bring to her capital the ablest Protestants and freethinkers in the land; and Joseph II. himself, with all his fervour for social and political improvement, was not so impressed as his admirers wished to believe by the importance of an intellectual movement

[1] S. S. xii. p. 278.

that should be at once thoroughly national and truly great.

Although the proposal for an Academy came to nothing, Lessing was invited in 1769 to assume very much the same position in regard to the Vienna theatre that he had occupied in regard to the theatre in Hamburg. But he could not persuade himself to have anything more to do with theatrical undertakings, and after some correspondence he finally broke off the negotiations.

He was now in a very painful position. Germany had received from him work such as she had never before seen, yet for the greatest and freest of her sons she appeared unable or unwilling to provide even daily bread. In the autumn of 1769, however, relief came from a quarter from which he had not anticipated it.

Among the friends he had recently made was Johann Arnold Ebert, a native of Hamburg, but now a professor at a college in Brunswick. He was five years older than Lessing, and had acquired distinction as a fresh and original writer. He was especially famous for his acquaintance with English literature, a profound knowledge of which he strove with energy and intelligence to diffuse among his contemporaries. He had long admired Lessing; and when the two men were introduced in Hamburg, they soon became intimate friends. It was a subject of deep regret to him both for his own sake and the sake of Germany that Lessing should think of leaving the country; and he resolved to do what he could to secure for him a position congenial to his tastes.

The Hereditary Prince of Brunswick—the same who afterwards led the Prussian army in the first war of the Revolution, and who ultimately fell at Jena—was now a man of thirty-four, and enjoyed a reputation higher than that of any other German prince. He had won by his exploits in the Seven Years' War the applause of Frederick; he was known to have more than ordinary interest in literature and art; and he had the charm of a frank and

courteous manner. Ebert, being on friendly terms with him, spoke to him of Lessing; and the Prince, who longed to play the *rôle* of a great patron of letters, was delighted at the idea of bringing so distinguished a man to the Duchy. There was no danger of his wish being opposed in the palace, for he was all-powerful in the little State; and the Duke, his father, although a man of weak character, sensuous, and extravagant, was not altogether without literary tastes.

In the middle of the seventeenth century Augustus, a highly intelligent Duke of Brunswick, had founded in Wolfenbüttel, then the capital of the Duchy, a splendid library known as the Bibliotheca Augusta. It was deliberately planned, and for the literary treasures collected he raised a handsome building, in imitation of the Pantheon at Rome, opposite the palace. Here Leibnitz acted for some time as librarian; and although the successors of Augustus did not display so liberal a spirit as he, valuable additions were occasionally made to the library. In some departments, especially in its collections of Bibles and manuscripts, it had, and still has, the fame of being one of the best institutions of the kind in Europe.

At the time when Ebert spoke of Lessing to the Hereditary Prince the office of librarian was filled; but he offered, if Lessing chose to accept the appointment, to find a new post for the existing occupant. The salary was only six hundred thalers a year; but the conditions otherwise were made most favourable. To the mere mechanical duties of librarian Lessing was to attend just as much or as little as he pleased. For these he was to have two assistants and a man-servant. His main function would be thoroughly to investigate the library and to bring to light its chief treasures.

The offer was made to him through Ebert in October, 1769. "It is in every way my duty," he replied,[1] "to come to Brunswick in order to thank the Hereditary Prince

[1] S. S. xii. p. 280.

in person for the favour he wishes to show me: let it imply as much or as little as it may. Expect me certainly, therefore, at the beginning of next month, and use the intervening time to arrange matters as you think best. I am convinced that my welfare is of more concern to you than to myself." When this was written, the Hereditary Prince had gone for a short visit to Berlin. Here he called upon Mendelssohn, with whom he had a long conversation; and he formed the wish to bring him also to Brunswick. Lessing was delighted to hear this. "I know of nothing in the world," he wrote to Ebert,[1] "by which the Prince could more certainly have secured my whole devotion and respect than by his making the acquaintance of my oldest and best friend in Berlin. That they would please each other there was no doubt beforehand; and what should I not give if it were possible for the Prince to draw him from that place, where I know he remains quite against his inclination?"

Lessing was involved in so many perplexities in Hamburg that he had great difficulty in getting away; but at last, towards the end of November, he arrived in Brunswick. There was then in this pleasant little capital a literary circle of considerable eminence, and it was much pleased and excited by the presence of the only writer in Germany, if we except Klopstock and Wieland, whose name was familiar in all parts of the Empire, and not altogether unknown beyond the Rhine. In the palace he was received with every mark of distinction. He had so little of the courtier in his nature, was so independent in bearing, so open in the utterance of opinion, that it was generally believed he had not favourably impressed the Prince; and after his return to Hamburg he wrote to Ebert on the subject, begging him not to desist in the good work he had begun. "I am so little accustomed to be on my guard, I am so careless about showing only my good side, and my good side itself is so changeable, that I am obliged to be

[1] S. S. xii. p. 284.

well content if people do not at first altogether hate me. Perhaps when he has known me longer—for in the end, I have often experienced, one gains the esteem of a good man if one tries to gain it honestly."[1] The Prince assured Ebert that Lessing's doubts were unfounded. "He had fulfilled all expectations; and for his own, he must honestly say that they had been surpassed." Events proved, however, that Lessing was not altogether wrong. He was never quite able to hit it off with one who was accustomed to submission and flattery: a return which it would have been out of his power to make for the greatest favours. He had scarce returned to Hamburg when a little incident proved that he would have some difficulty in accommodating himself to his new conditions. The Prince had given Ebert money to send to Lessing for the payment of the expenses of his journey to, and residence at, Brunswick; and Ebert in forwarding it hinted that it might be well to acknowledge with some words of gratitude this proof of princely good-will. Lessing expressed intense annoyance at the gift, fearing that some one must have suggested it as expected or needed, and told Ebert that he would content himself with thanking the Prince on his return.

Meanwhile, he had finally accepted the office of librarian. The understanding was that he should become thoroughly familiar with his duties, and then be allowed to gratify his long-cherished wish of visiting Italy. He had never looked forward with so much delight to this journey, for by spending a year in the library he hoped to prepare himself for profiting to the utmost by the opportunities of study and enjoyment of which he had dreamed for so many years.

On leaving Brunswick he promised to enter upon his work within six or eight weeks, and for some reasons he was really anxious to fulfil this engagement. "The life of the sparrow on the housetop," he wrote, "is thoroughly good only when one sees no end to it. If it cannot last for ever,

[1] S. S. xii. p. 286.

every day it lasts is a day too much." And he begged that everything should be so arranged that there should be nothing to prevent him from proceeding at once from Brunswick to Wolfenbüttel. Nevertheless, week after week passed without his appearing; and Ebert was in despair lest serious offence should be taken at this unusual dilatoriness. At one time he explained that the weather was too bad for travelling, at another that he had been ill; but the true reason seems to have been that there was one in Hamburg for whom he had now a warmer feeling than friendship. Ebert wrote to him jocularly of the library as his "betrothed bride." He had not exactly a betrothed bride in the literal sense, but he had formed relations which would inevitably lead to that consummation, and which had already given Hamburg an interest that had never in his esteem belonged to any other town. At last, however, it was necessary to go; and towards the end of April, 1770, he arrived at Brunswick, being formally installed in his office in the first week of May.

Several weeks before he left he had written the following to Ebert: "Can you guess who arrived here some days ago? Herder. It could not but be agreeable to me to learn to know this man personally; and now I can only say this much of him to you, that I am very well pleased with him." It was in the autumn of this year that Herder first met Goethe at Strasburg; and Goethe has himself told the world how much he owed to the influence of the intellectual and enthusiastic young divine. Herder, in his turn, was profoundly indebted to Lessing, whose works, however much he differed from them, stimulated him to fresh and fruitful activity. He never forgot the long and animated conversations they enjoyed on this occasion, which wandered over all the topics that then occupied the cultivated European world. A year before he had written to Nicolai: "I envy Herr Lessing in more than one respect. He is a citizen of the world, who throws himself from art

to art, from position to position, and with a soul that remains always young: such a man can enlighten Germany."[1] This impression was not likely to be weakened by actual contact with the man whom he had so well judged from a distance.

[1] Guhrauer, (1) p. 283.

CHAPTER XVIII.

FIRST LABOURS IN WÖLFENBÜTTEL.

I.

WOLFENBÜTTEL is a little town about seven miles to the south of Brunswick. Still farther to the south rise the Harz Mountains, and on a clear summer afternoon the Brocken may be seen standing forth against the sky in bold, grand outlines. Lessing, however, as already explained, was indifferent to impressions of this kind; and if he had shared the rising feeling of the time for nature, there was not much besides the far-off Brocken to kindle enthusiasm. The town lies in a flat, marshy country; and in Lessing's day it was rendered doubly dreary by the wall which surrounded it: a trace of other ages which has since been removed, to give place to public gardens and promenades. The contrast between the silent, deserted streets and the life and bustle of Hamburg was intense; and Lessing, whose inclinations had always been to the busy haunts of men, felt the change keenly. The absence of friends to whom he could speak with perfect confidence, and who were pleased and honoured by his society, was also a bitter loss. "I came away privately," he wrote to Ebert after he had settled in Wolfenbüttel,[1] "but it is not worth while to take leave when one dies—or travels from Brunswick to Wolfenbüttel! Do not think, however, because I put these two things together, that I think myself dead. One cannot *live* more contentedly than I have lived these three days. To you enthusiasts who are

[1] Sämmtliche Schriften, xii. p. 297.

every day at court, every day go out dining, such a life must, indeed, seem death. Exclaim ever, with the French servant, 'Live life!' I exclaim, 'Live death!'—if for no other reason, to have nothing in common with a Frenchman."

All the more earnestly did he strive to interest himself in the daily duties which he had voluntarily accepted. If we may trust a statement made by Heyne[1] in a letter to Lessing's successor, he was never a perfectly satisfactory librarian; and it may easily be believed that even so great a lover of books ultimately found it irksome to have to deal with vast masses of them, except in so far as their contents interested him. He indicated, however, no dislike of his work. "The position itself," he wrote to his father,[1] "is as if it had been made for me; and I have so much the less reason to regret that I have hitherto declined all other proposals." In the same letter he speaks of the library as "far more excellent than he had imagined." "I can now," he continues, "very well forget my books, which I have been compelled to sell. I should like one day to have the pleasure of conducting you about here, for I know what a great lover and connoisseur of books of all kinds you are. Special official business I have none, except what I choose to make for myself. I may flatter myself that the Hereditary Prince was more anxious that I should use the library than that the library should use me. Certainly I shall try to unite both; or rather, the one will follow from the other."

A few months after this letter was written, the pastor, whose last years had been rendered wretched by his narrow circumstances, was delivered from his many troubles by death. Lessing, although still in debt, generously took upon himself all his father's pecuniary responsibilities, and made serious sacrifices to help his mother and sister. For some time he thought of writing a memorial of his father,

[1] Zur Erinnerung an Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, p. 110.
[2] S. S. xii. p. 305.

which, as he wrote to his mother, "one would read elsewhere than in Kamenz, and longer than six months after the burial." The plan, however, was not realised.

II.

Lessing's settlement in Wolfenbüttel was a cause of sincere pleasure to his friends, who had feared that they were about to lose him for ever. They were extremely anxious to know in what direction he would now turn his energies; and their curiosity was shared by the public. "You would not believe," wrote Nicolai from Berlin,[1] "how much you are the subject of conversation here and in Leipzig. One says, he will now throw himself wholly into antiquarian study, and God knows whether he will not write Latin in order to attack Klotz like the hare in his own cover. Another says, who knows whether he will remain longer than half a year in Wolfenbüttel? for he must be off to Italy if he should go there on foot. Another says, no! he must first publish his tragedies, and has three or four comedies ready, which he will forthwith print. Again it is said, no! he thinks no more of the theatre. One says, he will complete the 'Laokoon' as soon as he has seen Italy; another, when he has seen Italy he will leave his 'Laokoon' alone and write solely on antiquarian subjects. Again another says, you do not know him! In the end he will throw away the whole lumber of antiquity, damn the theatre with Goeze & Co., and write a system of theology against the Socinians. See, dearest friend, how everybody talks of you. Write to me what I shall answer; or if you will have a couple of new reports spread about you, I am at your service."

So rich and many-sided was Lessing's life that not one of these theories was impossible or even improbable; yet, so far as the immediate future was concerned, all of them were wrong. The work with which he actually occupied

[1] Guhrauer, (2) p. 2.

himself was as different as possible from any to which the most intimate of his acquaintances could have looked forward.

In the early history of Scholasticism there is no more interesting figure than Berengarius of Tours. Standing, in the eleventh century, midway between Scotus Erigena and Abelard, he shared the spirit of both, and more than any of his contemporaries brought the dogmas of the Church to the test of reason. Transubstantiation was the theme on which he freely exercised his dialectical skill; and deep and wide-spread was the terror he excited by the audacity of his opinions on this subject. According to tradition, he was far less strong in will than in reason, and repeatedly retracted his opinions, although the retractations were scarce uttered when he began to teach as before. The greatest and most decisive of his opponents was Lanfranc, afterwards Archbishop of Canterbury, who wrote a famous treatise against him; and for centuries it was believed to have at last converted him to the orthodox faith.

In the seventeenth century a number of manuscripts had been sent up the Rhine from the Abbey of Weissenburg, in Elsass, for the purpose of being sold as old parchment to the gold-beaters of Frankfurt. Detained at Mainz, they were examined by one who was able to suspect their real value; and ultimately they were secured, at the cost of a thousand thalers, for the Wolfenbüttel library. To this collection Lessing at once turned his attention, and in a few days after assuming his post he made what he saw would probably be an important discovery. He lighted upon a manuscript which proved to be the answer of Berengarius to the treatise of Lanfranc that had previously been supposed to have converted him.

Lessing's first impulse was to publish the work as he found it. Afterwards he decided to leave this task to any theologian who chose to undertake it; but he immediately began to make preparations for a book on Berengarius,

with especial reference to the treasure he had found. A short time before, Herr Schmid, a theological professor in Brunswick, a man of great research, with whom Lessing had much pleasant intercourse, had found a letter in the library addressed to Berengarius by a friend of his youth, and had published it. It was owing to this letter, which had greatly interested Lessing, that he was prepared to see the significance of any document of the period that might happen to fall into his hands. He therefore issued his work on Berengarius in the form of a series of letters to Herr Schmid.

The whole summer of 1770 was devoted to the subject, and so completely did it absorb his thoughts, that until he had finished it he gave up all correspondence that was not absolutely necessary. As usual in referring to his own works, he wrote of the book to his friends with something very like contempt, but in reality few studies of its class take higher rank. Its object is to some extent the same as that of the "Vindications:" he seeks to present in its true light a character which had long been misunderstood. That Berengarius had been considered a heretic he does not deem a very serious misfortune, for "the thing called a heretic has a very good side. It is a man who at least desires to see with his own eyes. The only question is whether the eyes are good with which he desires to see for himself. In certain centuries the name of heretic is the greatest recommendation which can be brought by a scholar to posterity."[1] Very different is the charge that Berengarius deliberately expressed himself vaguely in order that his full meaning might not be suspected: an accusation brought against him by the Church historian Mosheim. "I know not," says Lessing,[2] "whether it is a duty to sacrifice fortune and life for truth; at least the courage and decision necessary for this are not gifts with which we can endow ourselves. But I know it is a duty, if one wishes to teach the truth, to teach it entire or not at all:

[1] S. S. viii. p. 254. [2] S. S. viii. p. 261.

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clear and completely rounded, without riddles, without reserve, without distrust of its strength and utility; and the gifts necessary for this are in our power. He who will not acquire them, or who, having acquired them, will not use them, deserves but ill of the human understanding if he delivers us from gross error, but holds back the full truth, and tries to satisfy us with a compromise of truth and lies. For the more gross the error, the shorter and straighter the way to truth: refined error, on the contrary, keeps us the longer from truth, the more difficult it is for us to see that it is error. Because Berengarius was weak, must he therefore have been false? Because I must complain of him, must I also despise him? The man who in the hour of danger is unfaithful to truth may still love truth, and truth forgives him his unfaithfulness for his love's sake. Any one who thinks of developing truth under all sorts of masks and paint may like to act as its pander; but its lover he has never been. I know scarce anything worse than such a pander of truth; and the suspicion that Berengarius may have been one is unworthy both of him to whom it relates and of him who could harbour it."

Equally disagreeable seems to Lessing the tradition that Berengarius in his last days, overwhelmed by the remembrance of his early belief, easily allowed himself to be persuaded that the conclusions arrived at in manhood, as the result of serious and prolonged thought, were wrong. "A Berengarius assuredly dies as he has taught; and so die all who have taught as honestly, as earnestly as he. Delirium must, indeed, be left out of account; and, what is still more terrible than delirium, simplicity and hypocrisy must not besiege the bed of the dying man, and press him until they have drawn from him a couple of ambiguous words, with which the poor sufferer buys permission to die in peace."[1]

These utterances, although deepening our insight into

[1] S. S. viii. p. 270.

the frank and noble spirit of Lessing himself, could prove little, apart from historical evidence, respecting Berengarius; but, by reviewing the facts with calm impartiality, he seeks to show that the most favourable estimate of this brave thinker is amply justified. He will not allow that he ever retracted his opinions, or acted otherwise than with perfect consistency and dignity. That Lanfranc did not convert him is fully demonstrated by the reply which gives occasion to the discussion.

The Reformed theologians had always claimed Berengarius as one of the greatest names on their side in the controversy respecting the Eucharist; and Luther, assuming this view to be correct, had heartily joined in the condemnation uttered against him by his enemies. Lessing, on the contrary, maintains that the doctrine set forth in the manuscript he has found is essentially that of the Lutherans;[1] and at the close of his argument he indicates his conviction that this must have been the doctrine of the primitive Church.

Although Lessing argues neither for nor against any particular view of the Eucharist, but confines himself strictly to historical ground, his friends were intensely surprised to find him treating the subject at all; and some of them were by no means pleased that he should seem, even remotely, to support the orthodox creed. "I know," wrote Nicolai,[2] "the desire you have long had to be at war with the theologians. As if that could be a pleasure! Do you know what Saal says of your 'Berengarius?' He says: 'Lessing has sworn to be in all things the opposite of Wieland. Wieland first wrote ecclesiastical, then amusing books; Lessing first wrote amusing books, now he will follow them up with ecclesiastical ones.'" The heterodox clergy of Berlin, as Lessing learned from his brother, were disgusted at the results he had set forth.

[1] This, however, is not admitted by the best authorities, such as Stäudlin and Neander. They regard Berengarius as rather the forerunner of Calvin.

[2] Guhrauer, (2) p. 19.

"They wish to have healthy reason in their system; and now you mischievously come and destroy for them the work of so many years." Those who held by the old paths, although they could not but feel that Lessing was a strange champion, nevertheless accepted with pleasure and gratitude such aid as he had given them. Ernesti, in one of his lectures at the Leipzig university, held Lessing up as an example that "if a man thoroughly understands *humaniora* he can treat with learning every subject in the world;" and he openly announced his willingness to confer on him the degree of Doctor Theologiæ. "You would not believe," Lessing wrote to Frau König, "in what a delightful odour of orthodoxy I have put myself with our Lutheran theologians. Prepare yourself to hear me shrieked about as a pillar of our Church. Whether that will quite suit me, and whether I may not soon lose the good praise again, time will show."

III.

About this time Lessing's publisher, Voss, was anxious to issue a complete edition of his writings. He himself looked upon them with little favour; but in order to oblige Voss, with whom he had continued to be on friendly terms, and to prevent the issuing of a pirated edition, he at last consented to undertake the task. How reluctantly he did so, and how sincere were his protestations that his early works no longer interested him, may be gathered from the fact that he begged Ramler to strike out any of the epigrams and lyrics that displeased him, and to make any changes that seemed to him to improve those retained. "This cannot," he wrote, "give much trouble to you, who still have all the poetical colours on your palette, while I now scarce know what poetical colours are." The altered manuscript was not even to be returned to him, but to be handed at once to the printer.

In 1771 the first volume appeared, the only one that

was issued during Lessing's life, the edition being completed after his death under his brother's superintendence. It was fortunate, however, that he was persuaded to achieve even so much, for the volume included not only his lyrics and epigrams, but one of the most valuable of his purely literary treatises: his "Desultory Remarks on the Epigram and some of the foremost Epigrammatists" ("Zerstreute Anmerkungen über das Epigramm, und einige der vornehmsten Epigrammatisten").[1]

This little work displays the same method as that with which we have become familiar in his other writings. He takes the opinions of his predecessors—Vavassor, Scaliger, Boileau, and Batteux—and by the critical examination of them rises to his own conclusions. Full of learning and ideas, the treatise is nevertheless so compressed in style that it contains scarce a word which is not essential to the full statement of his meaning. To adopt a phrase of Herder's, it may be defined as itself an epigram. Yet so simple, so natural is the progress of his thought, that the author seems to be talking to us without effort; our interest is at once awakened, and it is sustained whether his arguments carry conviction or not.

An epigram was originally merely an inscription upon a monument. What connection exists between the epigram as we now understand it and this original meaning? Those who before Lessing had treated of the subject maintained that there was no connection between the two things. According to Scaliger, every short poem is an epigram; according to Batteux, an epigram is simply an idea happily expressed in few words. Lessing, however, holds that the true epigram corresponds, not indeed to the inscription alone, but to the inscription and the monument together. When we see a monument whose object we do not understand, our curiosity is excited; we

[1] An English translation of this essay appeared in 1825. The same volume includes a translation of Lessing's epigrams, his fables, and his "Discussions" on the Fable.

turn to the inscription, and our curiosity is satisfied. It is precisely the same with the epigram. It consists of two parts. Of these, the first, like the monument, arouses curiosity, expectation; the second—the disclosure—gratifies our curiosity. Lessing insists that this correspondence is not accidental. The epigrammatists, in his opinion, deliberately sought to imitate the impression caused by the monument with its inscription; and that was why the peculiar class of poems they produced were called epigrams.

Probably few readers have ever been convinced that this is historically accurate. In the first place, it is altogether unsupported by evidence; and in the second, there would have been no just reason for adopting the name "epigram" if the intention had been to convey the effect of the monument as well as that of the inscription. Had the epigrammatists set to work thus deliberately, they would have invented a word which would have taken in both parts of the poem.[1] Lessing was misled by his desire to find some rational ground for limiting the meaning of the term epigram in a particular way. It is by a slow process of growth, not by a sudden development, that different branches of poetry pass from indistinct beginnings to their ripe and final form.

Apart, however, from the historical question, it would be difficult to find for a particular kind of epigram—that which Martial brought to perfection—a better definition than the one provided by Lessing. All Martial's best epigrams, as Lessing shows, fulfil these two conditions: they excite our curiosity, and satisfy it. Moreover, the analogy between the epigram and that of which Lessing

[1] This objection was urged in a valuable essay on the Epigram by Herder, who gave the following as a specimen of a class of epigrams which Lessing's definition would exclude:—

"Der edle deutsche Mann,
Der Wahrheit lieb gewann,
Dass sie ihm, jeglicher Gestalt,
Neu oder alt,
Verachtet oder hässlich gar,
Gleichgiltig nimmer war—
Wer?—*Lessing ist der Mann.*"

Never did opposition assume a more attractive guise.

supposes it to be an imitation is in his hands fruitful of results. As a monument is raised only to commemorate a great man or a great action, so the epigrammatist, he says, will choose only a subject about which it is worth while to be curious. And, like a good monument, the part of an epigram that awakens expectation will have a certain unity; the eye will easily pass over its different elements and comprehend their significance. Again, since an inscription deals with a well-known theme, and is meant chiefly for persons who only hurriedly glance at it, it is made as brief as possible; so the part of an epigram which satisfies curiosity will above all things be tersely expressed. Farther, we see at once from the general aspect of a monument what must be the general character of the inscription. A melancholy figure will not be cheerfully described; nor will melancholy words set forth the purpose of a cheerful monument. In like manner, there will be perfect harmony in the tone of the two parts of a good epigram.

Of the epigrammatists whom Lessing discusses, Martial naturally receives the chief attention; and among other questions relating to him, that of his coarse immorality is raised. Lessing points out that even an immoral work may have artistic excellence, but he admits that the latter quality ought not to save such a work from condemnation. In mitigation of the sentence which modern readers necessarily pass upon Martial from this point of view, he uses the argument he had formerly applied in defending the moral character of Horace: that in the ideal world of poetry a writer allows himself liberties which he would be far from exercising in actual life. We are also reminded that Martial frequently received his topics from others, and that he treated them in the only manner which he knew would be deemed satisfactory. Lessing, however, does not pretend that this reasoning justifies Martial's unbounded grossness.

Only a few of the poems of Catullus are allowed to be epigrams in the true sense; and the great majority of the

so-called epigrams in the Greek anthologies are also excluded from this class. That the works thus placed beyond the pale of his definition have high poetical merit, Lessing does not deny; all he asserts is that they are not epigrams. If, however, we reject his theory of the origin of the epigram, we are only entitled to say that they are not epigrams of a special kind: of the kind cultivated by Martial, and, it may be added, by Lessing himself.

While Lessing insists that the point of an epigram must be in its conclusion, in the part for the sake of which our curiosity is stirred, he urges that this should consist of words which express a real thought, not merely of words which owe their effect to a particular arrangement. At the same time, it is not, he thinks, unlawful to aim merely at producing a certain surprise; as when the epigrammatist begins as if he were speaking of something lofty and ends with something of no importance, or when he changes what promises to be blame into praise or praise into blame. Rigid critics exclude the pun from the epigram. On condition, however, that the ambiguity shall not be foreseen, and that it shall be more than a mere play upon words, Lessing does not altogether condemn it. "After all," he says, "it is well to remind too strict critics from time to time that they ought not to make laughter too hard and rare for us." [1]

IV.

When Lessing was a student at Wittenberg he was one day turning over a pile of volumes by wretched Court poets when he suddenly came upon a volume by a writer whose name he had never heard—Andreas Scultetus. He took it up without much hope that it would be worth reading, but was agreeably surprised to find in it real imaginative power. He wrote out the poem word for word,

[1] S. S. viii. p. 443.

and so often read it that if every copy had been destroyed he would have been able to reproduce it from memory. In Leipzig he used to declaim parts of it to Kleist; and the latter was so struck by one line in a passage describing the soaring of the lark—

"In Augen ist sie nicht, nur immer in den Ohren"—

that he reproduced it in a slightly altered form—

"Die Lerche, die im Auge nicht,
Doch immer in den Ohren ist."

As Scultetus was a Silesian, Lessing, when in Breslau, made all kinds of inquiries about him, and at last discovered that the poem was written while the author was a boy at school in the early part of the seventeenth century, and that he probably died before reaching manhood. Two other poems by him at the same time were brought to light.

A Brunswick man of letters, Zachariä, was now engaged in issuing an edition of the German poets. Lessing, while at Hamburg, placed at his service the works of his favourite; and in 1771 they were published, along with two letters setting forth the facts now mentioned, and marking both the defects and graces of Scultetus. These letters are deeply interesting, not only because they indicate the delight with which Lessing welcomed every trace of true genius, but because of the warmth of the references in them to his friend Kleist. "I live," he says,[1] "a very pleasant hour in occupying myself for you with my old poetic foundling, and at the same time with the memory of a friend whose least qualities were those of the poet and the soldier." "How gladly," he concludes,[2] "should I strew with more beautiful flowers the grave of a young poet who wrote a line for which Kleist envied him!"

V.

Although Lessing may not have distinguished himself in his technical duties, there never was a librarian who

[1] S. S. viii. p. 360. [2] S. S. viii. p. 363.

knew better how to turn to advantage the treasures committed to his keeping. He entered upon a thorough investigation of them; and his immense learning soon disclosed to him whether he was in any particular instance on a track which it was worth while to follow. The results of his labours he communicated in a series of volumes entitled "Contributions to History and Literature" ("Zur Geschichte und Litteratur"). He began their publication in 1773, and continued to issue them, at longer or shorter intervals, till the year of his death. They deal with a large range of subjects: mediæval German poetry, the Greek anthologies, Marco Polo, a stained glass window in the cloister of Hirschau—any theme, in short, on which he was able to throw light from the contents of the library. Sometimes he merely prints an old manuscript; at other times he enriches the disclosure he has to make with observations of his own. None of the papers are altogether uninteresting; and one of them, on Adam Neusern, a German who in the sixteenth century became a Mohammedan, deserves high rank among his "Vindications." But for the most part they belong to a wholly different class from any to which Lessing's name had before been attached. He often found the work excessively tiresome; and in many of his letters he gives vehement expression to his disgust that he should be compelled to waste his time in such labours. He was sustained, however, by the desire to make the library as widely known and as useful as possible; and since he was urgently in need of money he had to bore the plank, according to one of his favourite phrases, at the thinnest end.

CHAPTER XIX.

"EMILIA GALOTTI."

I.

In determining to have nothing more to do with the theatre Lessing did not realise the strength of his own literary impulses. For a time he remained true to his purpose; but by-and-by the old tendencies reasserted themselves, and in the last months of 1771, after a brief visit to Hamburg and Berlin, he was hard at work at a tragedy of a far greater and more ambitious nature than those he had as yet completed. This was "Emilia Galotti," which he had begun many years before in Leipzig. He had worked at it in Hamburg also, intending it for the stage of the National Theatre; but it was thrown aside in disgust after the failure of that enterprise. While in Berlin he promised Voss to finish it for a volume of tragedies which should include, besides it, "Miss Sara Sampson" and "Philotas." It was also meant to be represented at the Brunswick theatre in March, 1772, on the occasion of the birthday of the Duchess Dowager. The actor Döbbelin with his company received the manuscript as Lessing proceeded with it, in order that the parts might be properly distributed in good time. Towards the close of his work, whether because of his incurable dilatoriness, or because he found some difficulty in satisfactorily solving the problems of the play, he advanced so slowly that it was doubtful whether it would be ready on the appointed day. At last Döbbelin, becoming impatient, threatened to dismiss the scheme from his thoughts unless the whole play were speedily placed in

his hands. This was effective. Lessing set to work in earnest, and towards the end of February the last scene was finished.

The tragedy, like his previous dramatic writings, is in prose; and it is worthy of note that, notwithstanding all Lessing had said against the French drama, he adheres as rigidly to the three unities as Racine or Voltaire themselves. The motive of the play is taken from the Roman legend of Virginia. In details, however, the two stories have nothing in common. Lessing lays the scene in an Italian court; and the characters are altogether modern. Moreover, the action is in no way associated with public history. The fate of Virginia is merely an incident in the deliverance of Rome from the tyranny of the Decemvirate; that of Emilia Galotti concerns only the personages who are introduced to us on the stage.

Emilia is the daughter of Odoardo Galotti, a man of fiercely independent spirit, not without tenderness, but stern in his ideas of morality and discipline. Emilia's mother, Claudia, is very different. She is affectionate but weak, perfectly correct in her principles, but easily impressed by outward show and flattered by the attention of superiors. Odoardo, who is at enmity with the Prince, lives at a distance from Guastalla, the capital of the principality; but he has been persuaded to let his wife and daughter remain for some time there for the sake of Emilia's education. During their residence in Guastalla the latter is betrothed to Appiani, a young count who is not a born subject of the Prince, but has voluntarily entered his service. As Emilia is not of the same rank as himself, he resolves to leave the court after their marriage, and to live with his young and beautiful wife on his estates in Piedmont.

Unfortunately, the Prince, who has all the charm of youth, refined taste, and a polished and graceful manner, and who, although at heart sensuous and selfish, occasionally feels the power of good impulses, has seen Emilia and

passionately loves her. On the morning of the day on which the action takes place, and which is also the day of the wedding, he learns for the first time from his chamberlain, Marinelli, that the woman who has so fascinated him is about to be united to another. He is in despair, and bitterly denounces Marinelli for not having sooner told him of Appiani's engagement. Marinelli is a courtier of the meanest and most degraded type, wishing to minister by any means to the passions of his master. He suggests that it may not yet be too late to interfere. The Prince is about to marry, for reasons of State, a Princess to whom he is indifferent. Why not, asks Marinelli, pretend that it is necessary to send immediately an ambassador on an important mission connected with this approaching event? And why should not the ambassador be Appiani? The Prince consents, promises to go at once to his castle at Dosalo near Guastalla, and gives Marinelli full power to act for him as he may see fit.

Meanwhile, on a day of so much importance, Odoardo comes to see Emilia and her mother. On his arrival he finds that the former has gone to church; and although he has not seen his wife for some time, he cannot repress an expression of strong disapproval that she should have been allowed to go alone. Both anger and alarm are stirred when he by-and-by learns that the Prince, his enemy, has seen and talked to Emilia. He is, however, unwilling to say all he thinks of the subject, and goes hastily away before Emilia's return. They are to follow, with Appiani, later in the day.

Odoardo's fears were too well grounded. He has hardly left when Emilia (here appearing for the first time) rushes breathless and confused into the room. With every manifestation of terror she tells her mother that, while she was at church, the Prince came, lightly placed himself behind her, whispered into her ear passionate words, and when the congregation dispersed took her hand in the porch and spoke to her long and earnestly. Overwhelmed by a rush

of conflicting feelings, she had answered nothing, but had at last, half senseless, fled in dismay. She now wishes to reveal everything to Appiani; but Claudia will not hear of this, and tells her she has mistaken mere politeness for love. Emilia allows herself to be persuaded, and remains silent.

When Appiani receives from Marinelli the message from the Prince, he firmly declines to accept the office thrust upon him; and as he owes no allegiance to the Prince, it is of course impossible to represent its acceptance as an absolute duty. Marinelli has, however, taken other means of bringing Emilia into the power of his lord. When the wedding party are driving past Dosalo, bandits fall upon them and Appiani is murdered. Servants who know the part they are expected to play rush to the scene, and, under the pretext of saving her, bring Emilia to the castle. She does not realise that her lover has been killed, but is filled with vague terror, which becomes deep and intense when she learns into whose hands she has fallen. The Prince, in the presence of Marinelli, tries to soothe and console her, and at last, although against her will, succeeds in taking her into another room alone. Her mother quickly enters, denounces Marinelli, and calls in loud and excited tones for her daughter. She suddenly hears Emilia's voice, and darts with a cry of relief to her rescue.

The plot is thus far unfolded in the first three acts. In the fourth we are introduced once more to Odoardo, who has heard of some great misfortune and hurried to the castle; and for the first time to Orsina, a beautiful and passionate woman, who has long been the Prince's mistress. She has for some time been away from Guastalla, but on the morning of this day had sent to the Prince a letter asking him to meet her at Dosalo. Able to think only of Emilia, and tired of Orsina, he had not even opened her letter. Marinelli tries to get her away, but in vain; at last the Prince himself comes and coldly dismisses her. Her love is at once replaced by savage hatred and jealousy,

for she perceives the real meaning of the change. On hearing that Appiani has been shot, she does not hesitate to whisper to Marinelli that the Prince is a murderer. Left alone with Odoardo, she reveals the crime, tells him of the fearful peril to which his daughter is exposed, and at last gives him a dagger with which to defend his own and Emilia's honour. She then takes leave; and with her permission Odoardo sends back Claudia with her to Guastalla.

In the last act he announces to the Prince his intention of taking Emilia with him and placing her in a convent: the only possible destiny for one who has so deeply suffered. The Prince appears anxious not to thwart Odoardo; but Marinelli is prepared with a plausible scheme. It is rumoured, he says, that the murder has been committed by a rival of Appiani, and by a rival favoured by his bride. The latter part of the rumour he does not believe; but it will, he says, be necessary, in the interests of justice, to investigate the circumstances. Consequently Emilia must be kept apart both from her father and mother. In spite of Odoardo's protestations the Prince agrees with this view, and announces that until the inquiry is concluded Emilia shall live in the house of Grimaldi, his chancellor. Odoardo, left alone, sees what is meant, and despair dimly suggests to him that there is only one way of saving his daughter: by slaying her. He starts back, however, in horror from the idea, and is about to go away, committing the issue to Heaven, when Emilia enters. She has learned from her mother's tears what has happened, and the greatness of the calamity has forced her to be calm. Her father mentions the device by which she is to be taken from him, and in doing so draws the dagger Orsina has given him, saying that on perceiving the villainy of the Prince and his chamberlain he had reached his hand towards it to stab one or both of them to the heart. She entreats that the weapon may be given her; but he at first refuses. "You have," he says, "but one life to lose."

"And but one innocence!" she replies. "Which," says Odoardo, "is raised above all force." "But not," Emilia pleads, "above all enticement. Force! force! who cannot defy force? What is called force is nothing; enticement is the true force. I have blood, my father; as young, as warm blood as any. And my senses are senses. I stand for nothing. I am good for nothing. I know the house of the Grimaldis. It is the house of pleasure. One hour there under the eyes of my mother, and so great a tumult arose in my soul that the strictest exercises of religion could scarce allay it for weeks. Religion! And what a religion! To avoid nothing worse thousands have drowned themselves and are saints! Give me, my father, give me this dagger!" At last he is persuaded, and she immediately turns it against herself. He snatches it from her, and she raises her hand to her head for a hair-pin—he has just warned her that the dagger "is no hair-pin"—when she touches the bridal rose. "You still here?" she exclaims. "Down with you! You do not belong to the hair of one—such as my father wishes that I should become!" She then reminds him in a bitter tone, while she plucks the rose to pieces, of a father who long ago drove the steel to the heart of his daughter to save her from shame. "But all such deeds are of long ago! There are no more such fathers!" He suddenly stabs her, and as she falls into his arms, he is struck with remorse. "God, what have I done!" "Plucked a rose," says the dying Emilia, "before the storm had stripped it of its leaves. Let me kiss it, this fatherly hand."

The Prince and Marinelli enter. "Horrible father!" the former exclaims, "what have you done?" "Plucked a rose," answers Odoardo, "before the storm had stripped it of its leaves. Was it not so, my daughter?" "Not you, my father—I myself, I myself"—— She dies as Odoardo repeats the truth; and he lays her softly on the ground. "Now then, Prince," he says, "does this still please you? Do your pleasures still charm you? Still, in this blood,

which cries against you for vengeance? (*After a pause.*) But you wait to see how it will all end? You expect perhaps that I shall turn the steel against myself, in order to conclude my deed with an empty tragedy? You are mistaken. Here! (*throwing the dagger at his feet.*) Here it lies, the bloody witness of my crime! I go and deliver myself up to justice. I go and await you as judge—and then there—I await you before the Judge of us all!" The Prince stands for some time in silence, looking with despair and horror at the body. "Here!" he exclaims, addressing Marinelli, "lift it up. Now? You reflect?—Pitiful! (*snatching the dagger from his hand.*) No, your blood shall not be mixed with this blood. Go, hide yourself for ever! Go, I say! God, God! Is it not enough that princes, to the misfortune of so many, are men? Must devils disguise themselves in their friends?"

II.

So long as Döbbelin acted "Emilia Galotti" in Brunswick, Lessing would not once go to see it; yet it met with a splendid reception, and very soon it was the favourite tragedy in every theatre in Germany. The opinions of the critics, however, were by no means unanimous. Some, like Ebert, hailed the author as a second Shakespeare; others, including several of Lessing's Berlin friends, thought the play open at various points to serious objection. The judgment of Goethe was very different at different times. Its historical importance, indeed, he never doubted. "After a long struggle of the German Muse, continued during many years," he wrote in his old age, "this piece rose like the island Delos from the sea of works like those of Gottsched, Gellert, and Weisse, in order to receive softly a goddess in labour." But while in 1812 he spoke of it as a work which "at every time must appear new," eighteen years later he wrote that it could no longer be effective, and that the only respect due to it was the respect due to

a mummy, which gives evidence as to the high dignity of the dead.[1]

Whatever may be the decision as to the worth of the play as a whole, no impartial reader can fail to recognise in it high dramatic power. The character of the Prince alone would stamp it as a work of genuine imaginative force. The impulse of an inferior dramatist would have been to make him a gross tyrant, but Lessing goes to work more delicately and with finer insight into human nature. He does not even present to us a careless man of the world. There is a vein of something approaching poetry in the Prince's nature; he delights in art, talks of it with intelligence, and liberally rewards the artist. And although, stripped of all disguises, his love is purely sensual, yet it is not its sensual aspects on which his mind dwells; Emilia is his ideal of perfection, and he tries to persuade himself that it is because she appeals to his higher feelings that she so strongly fascinates him. And brutal methods of attaining his ends he will not expressly approve; he is really repelled when he learns that they have been resorted to. He has not, however, a touch of true nobleness; and by many fine strokes Lessing reveals to us the essential worthlessness which underlies the outward gloss of his character. "Complaints, nothing but complaints!" are the first words he utters, sitting at his table in his cabinet with papers before him. "Petitions, nothing but petitions! Yet they envy us! This I believe: if we could help all, then we were indeed to be envied." And he proceeds without examination to grant an important petition simply because it is signed by a person whose name is Emilia. Afterwards he shocks a conscientious minister by wishing to sign, also without examination, because he is in a hurry and occupied with his own affairs, a paper containing a sentence of death. With all his fine feelings he does not shrink from blasting the happiness of two young lives; and, like a true sentimentalist, he

[1] Guhrauer, (2) p. 57.

will not take the responsibility of his own misdeeds, but shuffles it off upon the shoulders of the miserable creature whose business is to gratify his whims.

Marinelli is a not less vivid and consistent conception. He fills us with loathing and contempt, for he exercises his ingenuity for the basest of purposes; and yet his villainy is not of a common type, for he does not practise it for gain or for its own sake, but from a mistaken sense of devotion to the Prince. He is, indeed, without personal scruples; but if he had them, it is clear they would be overcome by the estimate of his courtly duties, which to us seems so strange, but is common enough in the palaces of despots. Appiani is less boldly drawn; but he also is a distinct type—a young, somewhat melancholy man, apt to be superstitious, but passionate and proud. Whenever Odoardo appears, we feel ourselves in the presence of restless vigour; we are confronted by a man who knows not how to yield, and who will push to his goal, no matter what may be the obstacles, or fall in the effort. In Claudia we have the living image of those feeble natures which will not frankly look facts in the face, which push aside what is disagreeable, and, when the evil hour comes, meet it only with piteous shrieks and vague charges that ought in the first instance to be urged against themselves. Orsina, who has some qualities in common with Marwood in "Miss Sara Sampson," impresses us with a sense of vehement power. In emotion she knows no mean. If she loves, her love absorbs her whole being; her hatred stops at nothing short of death.

Not only are these characters boldly conceived; there is no pause in the interest of the play, we pass from scene to scene with fresh and growing curiosity. And the dialogue, although thoroughly natural, is strong and terse; never dwelling too long on a single idea, sometimes rushing forward like a foaming torrent that sweeps before it every obstruction to its progress. Everywhere there is the stir, the excitement of intensely concentrated life.

But notwithstanding these great qualities, "Emilia Galotti" cannot be allowed to fulfil the most essential conditions of the tragic drama. It would be going too far to say that the central motive is unfitted for the modern stage, although this is at least a question open to discussion; but one thing is certain: if a father is to be represented as deliberately killing his daughter, there must be no doubt as to the necessity of the deed; we must be confronted by a problem which is capable of absolutely no other solution. If there is even a suspicion that it is not the sole mode of escape from the difficulty, every other feeling is absorbed by horror at so unnatural, so monstrous an action. Lessing evidently felt this, and makes strenuous efforts to convince us that Odoardo is as much under an obligation to stab Emilia as Claudius in the Roman story was under an obligation to stab Virginia. It cannot, however, be said that he succeeds. In the first place, if any one was to be killed, the proper victim was not Emilia but the Prince. He alone is guilty; his death would deliver her from all cause of fear; and that he might have been slain is proved by the fact that Odoardo, as he tells his daughter, at one moment was actually on the point of stabbing him. But—what is still more important—we are never made to feel that Emilia's ruin, if she lives, is inevitable. The Prince, with all his faults, is not the kind of man who would owe a pleasure to an act of personal violence; he is too delicate, too refined for that. But, it may be answered, there is danger from the nature of Emilia herself; and this reply is justified by the astonishing speech in which she warns her father that she may be unable to resist temptation. "I have blood, my father; as young, as warm blood as any. And my senses are senses." Herein lies the condemnation of the play as a finished work of art. The Emilia who thus speaks is not the Emilia who speaks in the earlier scenes. There she is pure, open-hearted, childlike, incapable even of conceiving vicious conduct; here she displays an amazing, a repulsive ac-

quaintance with the meaner aspects of human nature, and betrays a fear that can spring only from a dawning love to the man whom she knows to be virtually the murderer of her betrothed. If she loves him, her feeling is utterly inconsistent with everything we have before seen of her; if she does not, her fears as to her own strength of will are simply inexplicable. In any case, it is hard to understand how, in the terrible circumstances in which she is placed, it could have occurred to Lessing to make her, even for a passing moment, think of the possibility of a voluntary yielding to sensual impulses. That she is not affecting a terror which is far from her real feeling is shown by the fire that glows through her words.

This objection is the most vital that could be brought against the play; and although critics have often attempted to meet it, they have done so in vain, for the facts are too broad, too patent, to be explained away.[1] Another objection, not cutting so deep, but still important, is that there is no justification for the appearance of Orsina, original and decided as are the outlines of her character. Nicolai, indeed, proved nothing in asserting that her entrance upon the stage was not prepared for by action, for she is so often alluded to that we are quite ready to see her assume even in the fourth act an important part. But when she appears, she effects nothing that might not be effected without her. The deed to which she impels Odoardo is the slaying, not of Emilia, but of the Prince. All she really does is to

[1] Of all critics who have discussed the question, Löbell, Stahr, and Düntzer most vigorously defend Lessing. Löbell maintains that Emilia must be supposed, through the whole course of the play, to have a passion for the Prince: an opinion indicated by Goethe in conversation with Eckermann, although he pointed out that the passion is indistinctly exhibited. Stahr and Düntzer do not admit that Emilia gives the smallest evidence of loving the Prince. A curious light is cast on Lessing's own conception of the character by one or two sentences in a letter to his brother Karl, replying to various objections urged by the latter:—"Heroic and philosophic virgins are not to my taste. When Aristotle treats of the goodness of manners, he expressly excludes women and slaves. In unmarried girls I know of no higher virtue than piety and obedience" (S. S. xii. p. 408).

tell him what has happened, and to provide him with a dagger; and for this her splendid outbursts of passion were certainly not necessary.

It may also be questioned whether Lessing is true to the highest idea of tragedy in failing to drive the forces he has brought into play to their uttermost issues. We may safely say that Shakespeare or Webster would not have allowed Marinelli to escape with a reprimand, however scathing; and should the Prince have been permitted to get off with a momentary agony? It is, indeed, sometimes maintained that he is a ruined man; that there will never again be sunshine in his life. But this is to misunderstand his character. The heart of a thoroughgoing sentimentalist is not easily broken; it is perhaps truer to say that he has no heart to break. The Prince will be unhappy for a few days, but he will soon convince himself that he was not really to blame, and proceed to new adventures. Emilia may even become a poetic memory to him, lighting up his past with a gleam of romance. True, Odoardo refers him to a solemn hour when the just and the unjust shall be righteously judged; but Lessing himself, in a passage in the "Dramaturgie," already quoted, had condemned beforehand any such reference. Every question raised in a work of art, he there says, ought to find its answer in the work of art itself, not in a world outside its range. The only penalties within the scope of the artist are those which spring from the orderly action of cause and effect in the system of things we actually know. And the Prince by his own act so exposes himself to the sweep of tragic elements that it leaves us dissatisfied to find that he is to go on as if nothing had occurred. In the ideal realm of the drama we look for a more fearless handling of the energies the poet summons into action.[1]

In spite of all its defects, "Emilia Galotti" still keeps its place on the stage. There could be no better proof of the power of unmistakable genius. The gold may lie em-

[1] Cf. Biederman, ii. p. 348.

bedded in dross; but no matter, the gleaming metal makes even the dross welcome.[1]

III.

There is another besides its literary aspect from which "Emilia Galotti" must be regarded: its relation to the political life of the time. This at once attracted the attention of Lessing's contemporaries. Some maintained that it was the Brunswick court he intended to bring upon the stage; and they had no doubt even as to the original of Orsina. The fact that the play was begun so long before disposes of this theory; but had it been planned in Wolfenbüttel, Lessing was a man of too delicate honour to deal in so gross a fashion with the family he served. The Duke formally granted his permission before the play was represented: how could it have been asked had the intention been to expose his own vices? But that Lessing meant to utter a solemn warning to the princes of the time, there can be no question. Every one recognised in the court of Guastalla a type to which many courts in Germany corresponded; so close was the resemblance that in Gotha the authorities would not permit the tragedy to be acted. The fact affords the best evidence how completely Lessing was in harmony with the deepest social and political tendencies of his age. He shared to the full that loathing for tyranny which, less than twenty years after this time, led to the French Revolution, and which had its root in reverence for the noble qualities of humanity and a generous faith in its destiny.

[1] Before the end of the eighteenth century "Emilia Galotti" was translated into Latin, English, French, Russian, and Polish. The English translation, which was by Dr. Berrington, appeared in 1794; but according to a statement in "The Annals of the Theatre," quoted by Guhrauer, a version of the play in which Mrs. Siddons had accepted a part was in rehearsal at Drury Lane in 1790. Her ill-health prevented it from being performed. In the present century there have been several English translations: one by B. Thomson in "The German Theatre" (1800), another by Fanny Holcroft in Holcroft's "Theatrical Recorder" (1805), another by J. D. Boylan and H. G. Bohn (1852), as a sample of an edition of Lessing's dramatic works.

CHAPTER XX.

LESSING AND EVA KÖNIG.

LESSING tried very hard to adapt himself to his new circumstances at Wolfenbüttel, but in spite of himself the position soon became all but intolerable. He could not endure the utter solitude to which he was condemned; and he was made miserable by the demands of his Hamburg creditors, to whom he owed in all about a thousand thalers. His small salary was usually drawn considerably in advance, and it was in vain that he sought to deliver himself by literary labour. The public read his books with pleasure, but paid for them wretchedly; and the only other way of making money that was open to him was—the lottery. He was no doubt induced to try his luck in this manner by the same impulse that made the gaming-table so fascinating to him; but he was also driven to it by the hope of finding relief through a sudden stroke of fortune. Up to the last hours of his life he pursued this phantom, never, however, with more than moderate success.

Occasionally he would visit his friends in Brunswick, and here he was always a welcome guest. Besides Ebert, Schmid, and Zachariä, the father of young Jerusalem, whose sad fate suggested "Werther," was one of the circle; and a young literary man, Eschenburg, a colleague of Ebert, by whom he had been introduced to Lessing in Hamburg, was held by the latter in high esteem. One or other of these men sometimes returned his visits; and Gleim also more than once came to Wolfenbüttel, from which Halberstadt is not very far distant. Towards the end of 1770 Mendelssohn was for a few days the guest of the Prince at

Brunswick, and Lessing was delighted to conduct his old friend through the library. "What an astonishing mass of books!" exclaimed the philosopher, as he entered (according to Karl Lessing). "And how little one knows! But I have come not for their sake but for yours. It is your opinions I wish to know, not what is in these beautiful coffins."

These occasional social pleasures were, however, far from making up for all Lessing had lost; when they were past, he felt more keenly how vast a gulf separated his ideal of a happy life from the reality. Hitherto he had enjoyed good health, but now even this began to fail him. In his letters there are constant references to illnesses more or less serious and depressing. His eyes especially caused him much pain, and often made reading and writing impossible; he also suffered from headache, and had sometimes so great a difficulty in breathing that he was obliged to rise and walk about at frequent intervals for the sake of fresh air. There were times when he absolutely loathed the routine of official duties; and there is intense bitterness in the manner in which he speaks of his "accursed castle"—obviously not, as has hitherto been supposed, the library, but the deserted old castle in which he lived.

Had he still been, to use his own phrase, "the sparrow on the house-top," it is quite certain that he would have been once more a free man before "Emilia Galotti" was written. By that time, however, he had formed an engagement which made it less easy for him than before to break up existing relations and start afresh. He had been betrothed to Eva König, the widow of his Hamburg friend who had died in Venice.

She was a native of Heidelberg, and, according to the most probable guess, was seven or eight years younger than Lessing. One of his biographers has tried to prove that even while König lived Lessing passionately loved her;[1] but this is to make him a hero of romance whether he will or not. There is no evidence whatever of any such

[1] Stahr, ii. p. 54.

attachment. The tone of his letters at that period can be explained without the smallest reference to a hopeless passion; and it is surely going too far to say that he could not have written the passage in the "Dramaturgie" on the love of Juliet and Romeo without himself being in love at the time. That Lessing, however, when he left Hamburg, had more than a feeling of mere friendship for Frau König is proved by every line of the first letter he wrote to her after his arrival in Wolfenbüttel. It begins with no warmer address than "My dearest madam," but there was only one woman to whom he could have written: "The whole evening I have gone out walking with you in thought; and if it really happened, what questions should I not have to ask you! One of them would be, do you travel this summer? I should follow you fifty miles, if you passed through here and I were unfortunately not at home." In the same letter he asks tenderly after her children, adding, "Everything about me here is so dull and wearisome that I should often give a great deal to have about me at least my little Hamburg companions."

From this time till their marriage nearly six years afterwards they kept up a regular correspondence.[1] It would be impossible to conceive letters farther removed from the outpourings of ordinary lovers. There are no allusions to mysterious secrets of the inward life; epithet is not piled upon epithet to express yearning passion. Often the two correspondents entertain each other by harmless gossip about common acquaintances; and if feeling is ever allowed free play, it is soon checked, as if its manifestations had no right to pass beyond strict limits, or even for a moment to border upon sentimentalism. Yet only a very dull reader will fail to detect in these simple, unpretending letters a

[1] These letters, originally issued by Karl Lessing, have been republished, as stated in the preface, in an admirably edited volume, "Briefwechsel zwischen Lessing und seiner Frau, neu herausgegeben," by A. Schöne. The volume includes a number of letters not before printed; and by a singular chance the editor has been able to verify nearly all the contemporary names, of which Karl Lessing gave only the initials.

note of true poetry. Frau König had evidently considerable resemblance to Lessing himself. Like him she was frank, honest, independent, always ready to make sacrifices for those she loved, but shrinking from the exhibition of deep feeling. Both his and her words suggest more than they directly utter; a modest phrase used by them has often weightier meaning than the ecstatic rhapsodies of more demonstrative natures. Thus we never lose the feeling that it is by loyal and noble minds we are here confronted: minds that prefer to take for granted the great experiences of life, or at any rate to indicate them by slight references rather than by lofty protestations. Lessing's letters have all the charm of his free and vivid style; and those of Eva König are written with the grace and liveliness of a clever and truly cultivated woman.

Towards the end of June, 1770, she and her brother spent some time at Pyrmont, and on their way back to Hamburg they visited Lessing at Wolfenbüttel. Her husband had left his large and important business entirely in her hands, and being a woman of good sense, energy, and tact, she undertook to manage it without fear. In August it was necessary for her to go to Vienna; and on the way she passed through Brunswick, where she was heartily welcomed by Lessing. Several letters passed between them during her long journey, for she stopped for some time at Munich and other towns; and when she reached Vienna, where she remained for about six months. there was no break in their communications to each other. Nothing is directly said of love; but it is easy to see that the letters are not those of mere friends. Although possessed of a lively humour and often writing in a bright and cheerful tone, she was liable to fits of depression, and then everything appeared to her in its darkest colours. This was partly caused by delicate health; and Lessing displays intense anxiety that she shall as much as possible spare her strength. On one occasion he even encloses some powders, with the remark that if they refresh her a single time

"they are worth the postage a hundred times over." "But why, my dearest friend," he adds, "will you not rather be healthy without powders? Truly you have only to be happy, and health will come of itself. And one infallibly becomes happy if one only firmly resolves to be so. Is there, then, nothing in the world which could make life once more pleasant for you? If there is any such thing, think only of that, and you will be both happy and healthy."[1] "If there is anything," she wrote in answer,[2] "that could help to make me as cheerful as you recommend me to be, it is your thoughtfulness about me." In Vienna she was apparently overwhelmed by recollections of previous visits made under very different circumstances. "Since I have been here," she wrote soon after her arrival,[3] "I have been in the same unhappy mood as at Pyrmont. If any one addresses me tears start into my eyes; and yesterday, when I was dining with Herr von Wagener, this caused me not a little perplexity. But how can it be otherwise? Everything reminds me of my past happiness. To-day, when I visited the manufactory, which is in excellent order, instead of feeling pleased, I was quite cast down. You are right, everything has its time; but is it in our power to determine this time? But believe me that I do everything I can to make myself cheerful. What more is possible?"

About this time, as we learn from a letter to his brother Karl in November, his own circumstances filled him with uneasiness. "I advise you to write less, that is, to print less, and to study the more for yourself. I assure you I should gladly follow this advice myself if my circumstances did not compel me to write. As with my ordinary income I can just manage to live, I have no other means of gradually paying off my debts than by writing. God knows it has never been more necessary for me to write than now; and this necessity of course influences the choice of the subjects on which I write. Anything that

[1] Sämmtliche Schriften, xii. p. 312.

[2] Briefwechsel, &c., p. 30.

[3] Ibid., p. 26.

requires especial cheerfulness of spirit or an especial effort, anything that I must draw rather from myself than from books, lies at present beyond my range. I tell you this that you may not wonder if, notwithstanding your displeasure, I add a second part to my 'Berengarius.' I must bore the plank where it is thinnest; when I feel myself less harassed from without I will again attack the thick end. I feel that the rearrangement of my old writings will cost more time than the trash is worth. However, I have promised Herr Voss to do it, and it will be the utmost I can manage to let him have one volume at each Fair. I should gladly write much more to you, especially about Theophilus and our mother, but my head has become so completely confused in thinking over my villainous circumstances that I scarce know what I write."[1]

Not a single trace of his restless discontent is to be found in the letters addressed to Frau König at this period. He even assures her that it has always been a happy knack of his to make the best of things, and that she has no reason to think of him as other than perfectly calm and satisfied. She has her doubts, however. "You sit away still in your dear Wolfenbüttel? I thought you were to spend the winter in Brunswick? And would it not be better to do so? Or have you made some acquaintances who help you to shorten the long winter evenings? If you have not done so, pray do it yet. You will otherwise become truly hypochondriacal."[2]

Early in 1771 she wrote to him that she had had a rather serious fall and had been unwell in consequence. "How uneasy," he replied,[3] "has this letter made me! You are ill, and ill in consequence of a very dangerous fall—if you have not kept your word and written to me about it by the next post, I shall believe you are unable to write—but who tortures himself beforehand? And who should not always hope the best? You are quite better again, and I think of you, after a little illness, as healthier than you have ever

[1] S. S. xii. p. 323. [2] Briefwechsel, &c. p. 49. [3] S. S. xii. p. 342.

been in Vienna. On this footing I will write to you, as one healthy person to another, one contented person to another." This heroic resolution, however, does not last long, for at the close of the letter he says: "In my uncertainty about you I can think of nothing else. Write to me two lines, dearest madam, on receipt of this, if you have not already done it. Thus alone I can learn whether you place the least importance on the interest I take in everything that concerns you."

They tried their fortunes together at the lottery, and in a good many of the letters there are references to this subject, although it is obvious that she concerns herself with it only because it seems to amuse her friend. She gives him all the news about literary people in Vienna, and about the theatre there, that she thinks will interest him; and he in return tells her what he hears from Hamburg. One piece of intelligence relates to Pastor Goeze, who, it will be remembered, while Lessing was in Hamburg, became involved in a bitter controversy about the prayer for the destruction of the heathen. "The mine was sprung on the last fast-day," writes Lessing.[1] "Goeze demanded of the magistrate whether the prayer was to be offered, and was told that another must be chosen instead of it. Full of indignation, he resigned his Seniorate, and the resignation was immediately accepted. People say that his wife fainted on hearing this, and draw the conclusion that he had no suspicion he would be allowed to resign. But that is not a necessary conclusion, is it? The only conclusion to be drawn is that a woman cannot console herself for the loss of a title so easily as a man. When the Frau Seniorinn becomes at once Frau Pastorinn again, that is no joke! Do you not think so?"

There is an amusing passage about Klopstock. "You know that Klopstock is now in Hamburg. You know also how he likes to associate with the ladies. I know not how many women and girls he is already said to have persuaded to learn to skate in order to keep him company. But that

[1] S. S. xii. p. 318.

is nothing to a reading society which he has established at Frau von Winthem's, and of which all our lady friends are members. But you will doubtless have heard of this from Hamburg; and I should only like to know whether, when you return to Hamburg, it will not be your first business to become a member of this sentimental society?"

"The Klopstock skating and reading societies," replied Frau König,[1] "made me laugh heartily. My imagination immediately placed before me the whole circle of ladies, with him in the midst, enchanted to see the tears rolling down the cheeks of his auditors at some pathetic passage. What I feared, however, was that he should follow some of them home and make discoveries which would disturb his satisfaction. What do you say to that? Was I right? And am I right in begging you not to trouble about getting a patent for me? It would be difficult for you; for Klopstock certainly accepts only pretty women, and in the end I should play a bad part among them."

This was written from Augsburg during the return journey in March, 1771; and a passage in the same letter throws a vivid light, not only on her own character, but on a side of social life at that time which historians are apt to treat too cursorily. "I am heartily glad that I am out of Bavaria. This land, otherwise so favoured, shows one at present nothing but misery and want. At one station between Munich and this there crowded round me certainly eighty beggars, among whom I should perhaps still have been standing had not the postilion showed his whip. This was at a miserable village; you may imagine how it is in towns. In Munich whole families run after one, exclaiming that surely one will not let them starve."

Hearing from her that she was to visit Heidelberg, her native place, on the way, he wrote to her there, "where his letter would certainly not be least welcome." "Herein," he adds, "I judge you by myself, for it would be impossible, I think, to be unhappy with my old mother and in

[1] Briefwechsel, &c., p. 76.

the place where I happily spent my youth. Too many pleasant reminiscences mingle themselves there with present sensations for that; and it is really all the same whether one is pleased with the present or the past, if one is only pleased."[1]

She stopped at Brunswick for a few days, and it would appear that although no definite engagement was entered into, their relation to each other became more warm and intimate. Up to this point their letters had begun, "My dear madam," "My dear Herr Lessing:" after this short visit to Brunswick each addresses the other as "My dear friend" or "My dearest friend." Yet her first letter from Hamburg, dated May 4, 1771, opens in a tone of doubt as to what Lessing really means. "I wish in Hamburg as much as in Vienna to know what you do, and therefore you will forgive me if I make inquiries sooner than you seemed to suspect, I will not say to wish. So at least it seemed to me. For, except a piece of news which might be postponed for any length of time, you asked for no letters from me. If, then, you wish to have more from me, you must remove this suspicion, and if it is unfounded, ascribe it to my hypochondria, which often deceives me."[2] Three days afterwards she returns to the same theme. "I should really have written to you by the first post if I had been well and had not had so much to write, if only to ask whether you expected more letters from me. I begin to think that this suspicion is not a mistake but a well founded guess. What would be more natural than that you, who write so well and write so much, should give up so pitiful a correspondent? Truly I should rather wonder at your not doing it than at your doing it."

Lessing was astonished at this misunderstanding. "Is it possible," he replied,[3] "that you can understand me so falsely? I expect, I wish no news from you except upon the one point? And why, then, should this one point interest me if every trifle that concerns you were not equally in-

[1] S. S. xii. p. 346. [2] Briefwechsel, &c., p. 81. [3] S. S. xii. p. 352.

teresting? But you yourself declare your suspicion to be a hypochondriacal fancy, and I have just received your second letter, in which you do me rather more justice, but by no means all that I should desire. I have, indeed, unfortunately, letters enough to write, and would have to write still more if I did not give my correspondents too often to understand how much I dislike writing letters which are other than a friendly talk with the absent. Most of the gentlemen whom I must answer would, if we lived in the same place, rarely see me; what pleasure can I have in writing to people with whom I should seldom have pleasure in speaking? How little, however, this is my case with you, you must know from your visit to Brunswick, if you could not otherwise know it. How constantly I besieged you there! Always it occurred to me too late that I must be troublesome to you."

This assurance was so satisfactory that Frau König answered it at once in a happy, confident tone. A passage in this reply exhibits Lessing in a light in which we have not hitherto seen him—as a favourite of ladies. "Ackermann has made an excellent acquisition in a new actor, whose name does not at the moment occur to me. His acting is admired, but still more his person, because he is said to be like a gentleman who pleased the ladies here. I say, is said to be like, for I find not the least resemblance, at least hitherto; and if I do not remark this resemblance in the future, I maintain that it does not and cannot exist. Do you now know who the gentleman is? I think you do."[1]

"'I do not know," answered Lessing,[2] "who had already told me that I have been for some time acting through a representative at the theatre in Hamburg. It is now the more pleasant for me to hear from you that, after all, the resemblance is not so very great. For truly I should rather keep my person altogether to myself, let it be what it may. However, if my representative is liked, I am vain

[1] Briefwechsel, &c., p. 93.

[2] S. S. xii. p. 356.

enough to wish that you had not alone among them all had the sharpest and best eye. For it is a bad thing to have to do with such sharp and good eyes. And yet not so bad either. Bad, however, or not, if you do not soon find that I am like him, I also should prefer not to see the resemblance."

A week after this he heard that she had again had a bad fall; and he writes in even greater distress than on the occasion of the former accident of the same kind. "A single line, my dearest friend, as soon as possible! I beg you for it very earnestly. Their Highnesses of Weimar come this afternoon to see the library; and I would that their visit were already past. So many other things at present irritate me and make me ill that I did not need to have anxiety about you to make me appear quite intolerable to strangers. But you are not really ill? I hope you are not."[1]

It was a token of the increasing tenderness of their feelings to each other that he should here for the first time have indicated to her that life did not flow so smoothly with him as he had hitherto made her believe. Her womanly instincts at once caused her to divine all that his words implied. "I thank you heartily," she wrote,[2] "for your letter and for the interest you take in my health. But believe me that I take the same interest in all that concerns you; hence I am not a little troubled that in your letter you appear so distressed. What is it that irritates you, makes you ill? If you are really as much my friend as I wish and imagine, tell me. I will meanwhile, if possible, think that it was the fancy of a lonely hour."

It was, however, much more than this. Nearly all the letters that have been preserved from this time show that during the summer of 1771 he was thoroughly wretched: in bad health, in low spirits, longing for freedom from the chains that bound him to uncongenial labour. "I

[1] S. S. xii. p. 359. [2] Briefwechsel, &c., p. 99.

know not," he wrote to his brother Karl on May 26,[1] "why you have not written to me for so long a time; but my reasons for not having written you know. I am not now, indeed, ill; but if I said that I am as I should wish to be, I should lie. Of all pitiful people I believe the most pitiful is he who must work with his head even when he is not conscious of having a head. But what is the good of complaining?" A little later he wrote to Gleim:[2] "The dust of books falls more and more upon my nerves, and they will soon be utterly incapable of finer vibrations. But I shall never forget that I have formerly felt what I no longer feel. Because I have become stupid I shall never be unjust to those who are not so; I shall not despise any sense because unfortunately I have lost it." Again, early in July, to Karl Lessing:[3] "If your only concern about me is that I should not let the empty praise of the theologians induce me to occupy myself with their quarrels and absurdities, you need have no trouble on my account. But I must unhappily tell you that otherwise I have been the sport of misfortune. Since I wrote my last, I have not even been in a position to meddle with theological nonsense. Even this letter I write as if I were half in a dream. The whole time I have been unable to fix my thoughts for a single quarter of an hour upon the same subject; and every line which I have been obliged to write, even if not for printing, has caused a cold sweat: which is true of the lines I am now writing. . . . Here I come to no man, and never leave my room except when I go to the library."

For some weeks he was unable to write even to her, the thought of whom alone now shed a ray of light on his dreary lot. "In all seriousness," he told her in a letter ultimately dated July 29,[4] "I was for six weeks as ill as a man can be who does not lie in bed and is not at death's door. . . . At every line I began, cold sweat burst out

[1] S. S. xii. p. 357.
[2] S. S. xii. p. 360.
[3] S. S. xii. p. 361.
[4] S. S. xii. p. 364.

upon my brow, and I lost all thought. I could enclose more than one letter to you, in each of which I was obliged to break off at the first half page. After a course of the Pyrmont waters, which I concluded yesterday, having drunk them eighteen days, I seem to be a little better. But still only a little, and you would not perceive from this beginning of a letter that I have already spent more than half an hour over it. After almost every half line I must spring up and have fresh air—— And so it happened at this stroke. Only, unfortunately, I have been obliged to make a very long pause. For it was on the 24th that I wrote so far with labour and pains; and now, on the 29th, I will try to go on farther."

He had promised, when she was in Brunswick, to visit Hamburg in autumn; and this was the one prospect which kept him from despair. Eva König looked forward with not less eagerness to this pleasure. On August 10, when she had been reading the volume containing his epigrams and lyrics that had just appeared, she wrote:[1] "If my best wishes have not been in vain, this letter will find you as healthy as you formerly were when you used to complain of too good health. I should like still better if it did not find you at all, and you were already on your way here. Arrange to come soon, or a whole cargo of ladies will come and fetch you. I think this is the most terrible threat I can hold over you, for I have just laid down your epigrams, and am fully confirmed in the opinion I have long held that you are an arch-enemy of women. Is it not thoroughly wicked to humiliate us so on every occasion? You must have come in contact with astonishingly bad women. If that be so, I forgive you; nevertheless, you must really be punished yet for all the things you say of us. At any rate, the maid you wish for [alluding to one of Lessing's lyrics] you shall not find."

Early in September he reached Hamburg; and at the request of Frau König he took up his residence, not at an

[1] Briefwechsel, &c., p. 109.

inn, but at her house. At last they came to a definite understanding. They had slowly learned that they were necessary to each other's happiness, and now they were formally betrothed, although in absolute secrecy. Their love had not the glow of a first young passion, for both had tested life at many points, and no longer pitched their expectations beyond its possibilities. But their feeling for each other was deep, serious, and true; it was also nobly unselfish, and enabled them to face with fresh hope and courage the trials and conflicts of the future.

Unfortunately, they were not in a position to marry at once. His income was too small for his own wants; and a little before this time she had learned to her dismay that her husband's affairs had not been left in such good order as had been at first supposed. It was therefore agreed, for the sake of her children, that they should not think of marriage until she was able to say that her circumstances had been satisfactorily settled.

After spending a fortnight in Hamburg, Lessing paid the visit to Berlin in the course of which he promised to finish "Emilia Galotti." Here he was distressed to receive a sorrowful note from his betrothed announcing the death of her mother. The letter he wrote in answer to this intelligence is full of warm and tender sympathy. It begins "My dearest, best, only friend;" but he does not on any other occasion allow himself so many affectionate epithets. In all his later letters he simply writes, "My love;" and she responds with "My dear friend" or "My dearest friend."

In Berlin he was received with delight by his old friends, and the literary coteries vied with each other in doing him honour. "I have been every day so besieged," he writes in the letter just mentioned, "and in the evening so long in society, that this is the first free moment which I have been able to spend in my brother's room in order to give myself the pleasure of talking with you. Of you I have

thought every hour, and you would extremely distress me if you were to doubt it."[1]

A week or two later he was back in Hamburg, where he passed the greater part of the month of October. The first letter addressed to him after his departure by Eva König gives evidence of the new stage on which they had entered. She is sure that he will write to her immediately on his arrival in Brunswick. "This you have certainly done. Oh yes, you have done it. You know that my whole peace depends upon it. You are convinced, are you not?—although you sometimes seem to doubt it—that I love you above all, value you above all, and that there is no more happiness for me in the world if I do not share it with you. If all the hindrances which separate us could only be removed, how should I thank Providence with joyful heart!" "The two first pages of this letter," she concludes, "I had written yesterday. Just as I was about to go to bed, it occurred to me that the post leaves early to-morrow. I conclude, therefore, about twelve o'clock at night, when I think of you as tired from your journey, in deepest sleep, and wish for you with my whole heart the pleasantest rest; and for myself the speedy assurance that, refreshed from the fatigues of your journey, you find yourself thoroughly healthy and happy. To this assurance you may add words which will not be displeasing to me. But—but—they must be words which come from your heart, as those do with which I tell you that I am, best, dearest friend, your most sincere friend, E. C. KÖNIG."[2]

Lessing returned to Wolfenbüttel with something of his old vigour, and for a time it seemed as if love had delivered him from the burdens under which his spirit had sunk some months before. "I not only arrived safely in Brunswick," he wrote to her on November 3,[3] "but have now again sat two days in my tower at Wolfenbüttel, and am healthy and happy. I should, indeed, be infinitely happier

[1] S. S. xii. p 372. [2] Briefwechsel, &c., p. 118. [3] S. S. xii. p. 375.

if my solitude were cheered by intercourse with the only person with whom I have ever wished to have unbroken intercourse. But even the hope that this is before me makes me happy; and shall a man be unhappy because he is not so happy as he wishes to be?" "In the evening," he wrote two or three weeks later, "I walk up and down my room many a beautiful half-hour, and think only of you. My eyes are not yet quite right; and I cannot spare them better than by talking in thought with you instead of straining them. Malchen, Engelbert, and Fritz [her children] are well and cheerful? I embrace them with you a thousand times."

The scheme of founding an Academy of Sciences in Vienna was about this time resumed; and inquiries were made of Lessing whether he would be prepared to accept a call thither on very advantageous conditions. Nothing ultimately came of the negotiations; but they were carried on for many months, and during the whole time he was more or less hopeful that they might lead to a prosperous issue. Many circumstances thus combined to give him fresh life; and their influence is seen in the opening scenes of "Emilia Galotti," in which the imagination evidently worked with unrestrained power.

Only one thing disturbed his peace, but this unfortunately affected his dearest interests. Frau König was now in sore trouble, for soon after he had said good-bye she found that her affairs, instead of improving, had fallen into almost hopeless confusion. She heard from Vienna that if fresh capital could not be invested in the factories there they would have to be stopped; and it was feared that her resources would not prove sufficient to meet the claims of creditors. She was in despair, worked day and night to bring order out of anarchy, and found in the thought of Lessing her sole consolation. "Gladly," she wrote, "would I live on bread and water, in the most miserable corner of the world, if I were once out of this

labyrinth."[1] He took the words seriously. "If," he answered,[2] "you would rather live on bread and water in the most miserable corner than remain longer in your present confusion, Wolfenbüttel is corner enough; and bread and water, and something more, will certainly not be wanting." Were she inclined to accept this solution, he would withdraw from the Vienna scheme, and make up his mind to settle permanently in Wolfenbüttel. "Then, my love, you can have no farther excuse for not keeping your word with me."

Her reply, breathing as it does a spirit of generous self-sacrifice, shows how worthy she was of a great man's love.[3] "I can think calmly of my whole past life up to the moment when I was weak enough to confess an inclination which I had so firmly resolved to conceal, at least until my circumstances should take a more favourable turn. I am convinced you would in any case have taken a friendly interest in all that concerned me, but you would not have made my affairs your own as you now do, although you ought not to do it. For my resolution remains unshaken: if I am unhappy, I shall remain so alone, and your fate will not be interwoven with mine. My reasons for this you know, and your sense of justice will not allow you to disapprove of them; do not, therefore, call them excuses—the word excuse vexed me. Ask your own heart whether, in like circumstances, you would not do the same; and if it answers 'No,' believe me that you do not love me half so much as I love you. The only thing I will beg of you is, that you will not be misled in your plans through me, but act precisely as you would have done had you not known me."

She somewhat lightened her labours by calling to her aid a man of business, who continued to work with her until, after years of anxiety, a settlement was arrived at. But early in 1772 her presence in Vienna became abso-

[1] Briefwechsel, &c., p. 127. [2] S. S. xii. p. 379.
[3] Briefwechsel, &c., p. 137.

lutely necessary, and it was decided that the journey should be undertaken in February. Lessing looked forward to seeing her with eager delight, and wrote from Brunswick, where he happened to be stopping for some weeks at the beginning of 1772, that he hoped she would pass through Wolfenbüttel. With all her generosity, and notwithstanding her occasional tendency to hypochondria, she was not without a little coquettish humour, and accordingly answered that she did not think it would be possible to go to Wolfenbüttel; "but," she added, "if you were already away from Brunswick, I should not expect you to come back for my sake." "You would not expect me," he replied,[1] "to come to Brunswick for your sake? Do you know, my love, that almost frets me? But you may not have meant the words to be taken literally! For truly, otherwise I should be obliged to keep you to them. But observe that all compliments tend to pass into indifference." She travelled with a brother-in-law, and it need scarce be said that Lessing remained in Brunswick till they came. The visit lasted only two days, but they were days of intense happiness.[2]

The first letter she wrote to him during the journey presents a vivid picture of the difficulties to which travellers were in those days exposed. "Have you ever in your life heard of a village called Rattelsdorf? We have been sitting in it now for nearly four-and-twenty hours; and who knows whether we shall not have to remain here four times four-and-twenty hours? It all depends upon whether the Main will fall; as it now is, it cannot be crossed even if we were willing to venture something." On the previous day their two horses had fallen. "Beside the first of these we remained for four hours, and did everything we could to save it: but in vain, we were obliged at last to leave it lying for the executioner of the nearest village. For Yorick this would have been an excellent scene. The postilion was an original; as good as he was

[1] S. S. xii. p. 406. [2] Briefwechsel, &c., p. 218.

stupid: both in the highest degree. 'O God, O God!' was all he said in the whole four hours, during which he worked on to bring the horse upon its legs; it was, however, so weak, that when he raised it, it immediately fell on the other side, so that he was a hundred times in danger of losing his life. I kept calling to him, 'Do not be foolish, man; the animal is done for, why should you make yourself miserable?' 'Eh, what?' he always answered, 'since it is thus with my horse, no matter how it is with me.' I said, 'You should go on.' 'No, even if you cudgel me, I shall not go from my horse while I have hope.' And he kept honourably to his word." When at last the "original" was persuaded to proceed to the nearest village for straw and hay, their misfortunes were crowned by the second horse falling into the water; and it was saved only by a number of people coming to their help. "For us it was miserable. We had, indeed, stepped out of the carriage, but it stood in the water, and the horse could not draw it out. We were obliged, therefore, to walk for three-quarters of an hour to a village over a frightful road, so that I do not even yet understand how I came through it. At every step I had to drag my legs out of the earth, and it rained till I had not a dry thread on my body. 'Now,' I said to my brother-in-law when we again sat in the carriage, 'for to-day have we had enough of fatalities?' 'God grant it,' was his answer; but his 'God grant it' was of no avail, for we had to go thrice through water, which each time came into the carriage. The last was so high that everything which lay in the carriage box was wet. To dry this was my business to-day." "My brother-in-law," she concludes, "tells me to send you his compliments, but at the same time to say that we have thought more of you in our misfortunes than we should have done if it had gone better with us. So far as he is concerned, this may be true. For immediately any misfortune came, he said, 'Herr Lessing is right, it is truly a scurvy life.'"[1]

[1] Briefwechsel, &c., p. 215.

It is easy to understand the fascination exerted by a delicate woman who could write thus in circumstances that would have overwhelmed a weaker nature. She evidently had that lively appreciation of the comic which is the best preservative against sentimentalism, and which, if associated with deeper qualities, is the secret of enduring youth and freshness.

When she reached Vienna, she was instantly plunged into a sea of troubles; and for three sorrowful years, separated from her children and from the man to whom she had given her whole heart, she was compelled to labour incessantly in the hope of extricating herself with honour. At times she almost gave up hope, and her health often appeared on the point of utterly breaking down. Had she enjoyed the assurance that Lessing was at peace and happy, her darkest hours would have been brightened by at least one star; but the time came when it must have been difficult for her to remember that he had ever been other than morose and melancholy.

After she had gone, and the excitement of writing "Emilia Galotti" was past, and it became clear that he was not to find the refuge he had expected in Vienna, the loneliness of Wolfenbüttel began once more to be oppressive, and he saw no way in which it would be possible for him to make money enough to clear his debts. "You will perhaps guess," he says to Karl Lessing on April 22, "why I have not written to you for so long a time. Because for precisely the same length of time I have been unable to work. I am almost back again where I was a year ago; and if I must exert myself I may become still worse. It is owing to this disorder (illness I cannot call it) that I have not yet seen my new piece acted, although it has already been acted three times."[1] As the summer of 1772 advanced he became more and more depressed. "Truly, my love," he wrote on June 27,[2] "you may say what you will of the pleasure which my letters give you; it is cer-

[1] S. S. xii. p. 422. [2] S. S. xii. p. 433.

tainly not equal to the pleasure which yours give me. Which of us has most need to be cheered would be a difficult question. You have only cares of which you can see the end one way or the other. But to me all life is now often so disgusting—so disgusting! I dream away my days rather than live them. A continuous work which tires without satisfying me; a place of residence which becomes intolerable to me through the complete lack of society (for the society which I could have I will not); a prospect of dull routine—all these are things which have so injurious an influence on soul and body that I know not whether I am well or ill. Those who see me compliment me on my healthy appearance, and I should very much like to answer their compliments with a box on the ear. For of what use is it to seem so healthy if I feel myself incapable of the undertakings of a healthy man? I can scarce guide the pen, as you yourself will see from this illegible letter, from which I have been obliged to break away more than five times."

Oddly enough, Frau König met in Vienna the actress for whom, as Fräulein Lorenz, he had a passing inclination when he was a young student in Leipzig. Frau König was enchanted with her; but Lessing gives her no occasion for jealousy in the reference which he makes to his old acquaintance in this letter. "That you have made the acquaintance of Madam Huber is very pleasant to me. I know not whether I ever told you that I knew her as Mademoiselle Lorenz; nor do I know whether she herself has reminded you of it. It is nearly twenty-five years since I last saw her, and in such a time one can, I believe, forget more confidential relations than ours were. She may be a very good woman, but she must be a very jealous actress, who will allow no one to compete with her. If her merits give her a right to this, it may pass; but it is said that these are not so very remarkable." [1]

His next letter, about a month later, is in answer to one

[1] S. S. xii. p. 434.

in which, among other things, she had told him of the representation of "Emilia Galotti" on the Vienna stage. The Emperor had seen it twice and praised it highly. "I must, however, confess," he had added, "I have never laughed so much at a tragedy." "And I can say," she continues,[1] "I have never heard so much laughing at a tragedy; sometimes at passages where in my opinion they should rather have shed tears than laughed." If we may judge of the acting by one specimen, the laughter was, to say the least, not inexplicable. Speaking of the actor who took the part of the Prince, she says: "What does he do at the conclusion of your piece? He tears open his great mouth, stretches his tongue as far as he can from his throat, and licks the blood from the dagger with which Emilia is stabbed!" "The detestable fellow!" replies Lessing; and one cannot help fancying that his indignation must for an hour or two have given him relief from the apathy of which he so bitterly complains.

Three months now passed, and although she longed for his letters more than for any other pleasure, she did not once hear from him. All sorts of fears filled her heart. He must be ill, or he must have forgotten her! Her brother-in-law, when about to say farewell on his departure for Hamburg, asked her what message he should take to Lessing from her. "The question surprised me. My heart was already oppressed, for I had spent a sleepless night and tormented myself with the thought that he would soon see you and my children, while I must remain behind alone in this sad position, without knowing whether I should ever again be happy. I could not, therefore, answer him till a stream of tears had given me relief. Then I said to him: 'Say to Lessing in my name everything you would say to the best friend of your heart, but at the same time tell him that he should write to me soon and often.' I know not whether it was the way in which I expressed this that forced tears from him, or

[1] Briefwechsel, &c., p. 269.

whether he really read what was passing in my soul; at any rate, I saw for the first time at that moment tears in his eyes, and it made me forgive him much." [1]

The letter to which this was a reply set her mind at rest as to the continuance of his love; but in other respects it brought her little comfort. "Is it possible, my love," it began,[2] "is it in all the world possible that I have not written to you for so long a time? that I have been able to hold out so long without seeing or hearing anything of you? If you were angry! If I did not believe that you know me too well! . . . I beg forgiveness a thousand times if I have caused you a single discontented and troubled moment. And yet I should be sorry if I had caused you none at all. But you will ask, how has it come about? Through a thousand things, all so petty that they cannot be told; yet taken together they have had such an extraordinary effect upon me, that, to say little, I have not really lived during the whole time in which you have not heard from me. Not that I have been ill; although I have not been well either. I have been worse than unwell; discontented, irritable, wild, angry at myself, at the whole world, you alone excepted. . . . You know, my love, what I have often confessed to you: that I cannot remain here for ever. In the solitude in which I must live here I become from day to day worse and more stupid. I must come again amongst men, from whom I am practically completely severed. For what does it help me that here and in Brunswick I can visit this and that person? Visits are not intercourse; and I feel that it is necessary I should have intercourse, and intercourse with people who are not indifferent to me, if a spark of good is to remain in me. Without intercourse I go to sleep, and awake only now and again in order to perpetrate a *sottise*."

He then unfolds a plan by which they will be able to meet. During the summer he had been engaged in the gigantic task of completely rearranging the library. He

[1] Briefwechsel, &c., p. 287. [2] S. S. xii. p. 445.

calculates that to finish this he will have to be hard at work during the winter. Then, under the pretext of carrying out his scheme of visiting Italy, he will ask leave of absence, and go to Vienna and see whether there is really no chance of ultimately settling there.

The prospect gave him momentary relief, and it so enchanted Eva König that visitors asked her what it was that had so changed her appearance and manner.[1] It was not, however, realised. At the end of the winter he was still in Wolfenbüttel; and as for the re-arranging of the library, he found it beyond his strength, and contented himself with less laborious duties.

Repugnant to Lessing as was his solitary life, a letter written at the beginning of 1773 proves that the career of a courtier would have still less suited him. "For eight days I have been compelled to go among men. I have been at court in Brunswick for the New Year, and have done with others what is of no use if one does it, but what might injure one if it were constantly neglected: I have made bows and gone through the proper amount of talk. My sole wish during this time was—Ah! you know it well, my love! Is, then, a happy year never to come again for you and for me?"[2]

Elsewhere he says he "goes to court as if he were cudgelled thither." To realise how much is implied in this bearing towards "the great," this detestation of idle forms that wounded his self-respect, we must recall the submissive spirit that distinguished at that time even the best minds of Germany. Klopstock and Wieland delighted to make themselves agreeable to princes; and all the world knows how Goethe fared at Weimar. Lessing was happy only in an intellectual atmosphere in which he could move and breathe freely.

At last, in February 1773, a really cheerful letter reached Frau König. At the time of writing it he had been a fortnight in Brunswick, whither the Prince had expressly

[1] Briefwechsel, &c., p. 290. [2] S. S. xii. p. 458.

invited him. A Hofrath had recently died, whose business was to advise the Duke in matters relating to the history and rights of his family. The Prince offered this post to Lessing, expressing his willingness that the librarianship should be retained along with it. "He assured me," continues Lessing, after mentioning these facts,[1] "that he would so place me that I should be able to settle here with the utmost satisfaction. 'But,' he said, 'you must remain with us, and give up your project of still going freely about the world.' I know not whether he had got wind of my present plan. But you may easily imagine what I answered him. I provisionally accepted his offer, without, however, concealing from him that without a better prospect I could not very much longer remain here. 'Through this position,' he said, 'you will receive a firm footing among us, and it will depend solely upon yourself whether you continue in your present career or strike out another.'" Unfortunately, before the matter could be arranged, the Prince had to make an unexpected journey; but Lessing expresses his conviction that in a few days his fate "will not improbably be for ever decided."

Fortune had been long in coming; now it seemed all but in his grasp. He was, however, destined to be once more deceived. He did not write again for six weeks; and when he did so, the letter began, "I could become mad!" Nothing more had been said of the project that had so suddenly promised to put an end to his difficulties, and to enable him to look forward to the future with a calm mind. "Without the smallest movement on my side he expressly causes me to come, treats me—who knows how beautifully? flatters me to the utmost, and afterwards acts as if there had been no talk of anything whatever. Since then I have been twice in Brunswick, have let myself be seen, and asked for information as to my prospects. But no answer, or as good as none! Now I am again here, and have sworn not to put my foot again in Brunswick till

[1] S. S. xii. p. 465.

of their own will they bring the matter to a conclusion as they have begun it. If they do not soon bring it to a conclusion, and will let me finish in the library certain labours which I could not finish elsewhere than in Wolfenbüttel, and which I must complete if all the time I have spent here is not to be lost, nothing in the world will then be able to keep me here. I think I shall find anywhere as much as I shall leave behind me. And if I do not—better beg than let oneself be so treated!"[1]

It was a pitiful game this vain and thoughtless Prince played with one of the loftiest minds of the century. A word from him would have sufficed to deliver Lessing from tormenting and ignoble cares; but in spite of his definite promise the word was not spoken. The probability is that he had been momentarily alarmed at the idea of losing one to whom he owed his reputation as a generous patron of letters, but that, hearing there was no immediate prospect of this misfortune, he dismissed the matter from his thoughts. Lessing bitterly resented the wrong thus done him, and towards the end of 1773 expressed his intention of writing to the Prince such a letter as had never been written to a prince before.[2] Meanwhile, he had been chafing fiercely against his bonds, panting for freedom. "Shall I not," he wrote in June, 1773,[3] "be at last compelled to go? For, by God, I cannot stand it longer. It must break or bend." Yet he feared to make his escape, for he could not ask the woman he loved to share with him the old uncertain life; and it was highly improbable that if he left Wolfenbüttel a better office would soon present itself. In the spring of 1774, when a brother of Frau König's had been made a professor at Heidelberg, Lessing expressed his willingness to accept a similar appointment. There could not be a more striking proof of the horror he had conceived of his position, for a professorship had always seemed to him one of the lowest deeps of human misery.

[1] S. S. xii. p. 466. [2] Briefwechsel, &c., p. 344. [3] S. S. xii. p. 470.

Hope having abandoned him, a deep gloom settled upon his spirit. Nothing could be more melancholy than the tone of the few letters he now wrote. Even Eva König heard from him only at rare intervals; and in 1774 nine months passed without his sending her a single line. She was distressed and perplexed, and repeatedly begged him to say whether she was to conclude that he had forgotten her or wished to forget her. Occasionally he gave utterance to an almost cynical bitterness. "This season," he wrote to Karl Lessing in April, 1774,[1] "you will read nothing by me. During the whole winter I have done nothing, and am very content to have completed the one great work of philosophy (or poltroonery)—that I still live. God help me farther in this noble work, for which it is well worth while to eat and drink every day."

Towards the end of 1774 Frau König reaped the reward of her long-continued labours. She was able to announce to Lessing that her difficulties had been overcome, and that she should soon return in peace to Hamburg, having honourably recovered from the ruins of the business enough to secure for her and her children a small income. He wrote, on January 10, 1775, to say how pleased he should be to welcome her back; but it is difficult to recognise in the letter his spirit and style. "You yourself, my love, will not wish that I should assure you with many words how much I shall be pleased to see you again. If I still know what it is to be pleased! You will find me healthy, and healthier than, unfortunately, I dare hope to find you: I appear also to my acquaintances as contented as any one can be. But God grant that they may not one day say: we have terribly deceived ourselves about him. Thus far I have advanced, that I see that all my anxiety, all my efforts, to free myself from these accursed circumstances are in vain. So, then, come what may! Only, my love, do not you take from me your good opinion."[2]

Almost immediately after sending away this letter he

[1] S. S. xii. p. 490.

[2] S. S. xii. p. 505.

resolved by a sudden and happy impulse to seek change of scene; and in a week or two he was on his way to Leipzig. Here he spent two days. At the end of his controversy with Klotz he had been deeply displeased at the line taken by Weisse in regard to it; but now he appeared to have nearly forgotten his displeasure, and had several long and pleasant conversations with his old friend. A little anecdote which has come down to us from this time shows that the misery he had undergone had not wholly quenched his humour. In honour of his visit the principal of the Leipzig theatre arranged for a representation of "Miss Sara Sampson." "You will go?" asked a local literary celebrity. "Heaven forbid!" answered Lessing. "Why not?" asked the other. "It is your child. You may see it in tatters perhaps; but what does that matter? One likes to see his child even in tatters." "That may be," was the reply; "but, sir, suppose I found it on the gallows?"

From Leipzig he went to Berlin, where he spent two weeks. At the end of that time he was hurrying southwards towards Vienna. The Imperial ambassador at the Prussian court had encouraged him with the hope that they would be only too glad at Vienna to provide him with a settled post, and had given him many important letters of introduction. From the letter in which he announces his coming to Eva König it is clear, however, that it was of her he was thinking rather than of his ultimate prospects when he decided upon his "adventurous journey." She was surprised and delighted, postponed the date of her departure, and expressed a hope that they might travel back together. "God, if this wish were granted me! Yet it is like a dream to me that I am to have the happiness of seeing you here."[1] "If I could only fly!" he answered from Dresden, where he had to wait for some days for formal permission from Brunswick to prolong his travels. Some business which took him to Prague

[1] Briefwechsel, &c., p. 369.

was quickly despatched; and then he hastened on without the loss of an hour, arriving in Vienna on the last day of March. He at once wrote to her from his inn:[1]—"I hope that I have arrived sooner even than you expected. Judge from this my longing to embrace you. . . . Before everything let me have a word saying when I may most conveniently come to you after dinner. For the first direction in which I turn in Vienna must necessarily be towards you."

S. S. xii. p. 511.

CHAPTER XXI.

JOURNEY TO ITALY—MARRIAGE.

I.

WHEN Lessing had been about ten days in Vienna, Prince Leopold, the youngest son of the Duke of Brunswick, arrived there. He was a youth of real distinction, of an affectionate and generous nature, and with a genuine love both of art and literature. The Empress Maria Theresa, to whom his family was related, was so pleased with him that she desired to retain him in the Austrian service; and he would willingly have complied with her wish. His mother, however, a sister of Frederick the Great, was anxious that he should enter the Prussian army, and had already begged her brother to find a suitable place for him. The Prince was obliged to leave the matter in the hands of his parents, and until they should have arrived at a decision he resolved to pass the time in a brief visit to Italy.

This may seem to have little to do with Lessing, but in reality it was of the greatest importance to him, for the Prince entreated him to accompany him on the journey. Passionately as Lessing had longed for many years to visit Italy, he hesitated. It seemed cruel that after so long a separation he and his betrothed should be again torn from each other: especially as he had looked forward to some of the happiest days of his life in the journey back. And he would have vastly preferred to go to Italy alone, to pursue his studies undisturbed. It was possible,

however, that by obliging the Prince he might be able to improve his position in Wolfenbüttel; and, besides, the original intention was that the journey should not last longer than six or eight weeks. He, therefore, ultimately decided to accede to the request.

Eva König was too unselfish to stand in the way, but the scheme was a sad blow to her hopes. The travellers started on April 25, 1775; and four days afterwards she wrote to Lessing:[1] "I have no pleasure in Vienna since my best friend has gone. I can with truth say that the few days I spent with you are the only happy ones I have had here. May God forgive your Prince Leopold for depriving me of your society! I shall never forgive him!"

During the time he passed in Vienna she had occasion to be deeply proud of her lover, for he was splendidly welcomed. "Never," wrote Herr von Gebler, a well-known writer of the time, to Nicolai,[2] "has a German scholar been received here with such distinction." At the theatre, where "Emilia Galotti" was represented, he was received with loud cries of "Vivat Lessing!" The literary men of Vienna showed him every honour; and he had interviews both with the Emperor Joseph and Maria Theresa. The latter—one of the noblest figures in Austrian history—was evidently much struck by his appearance and character. She asked him what he thought of the theatre of Vienna and of the condition of literature there. He had the lowest possible opinion of both, and was, therefore, at a loss how to speak honestly and yet to avoid giving offence. He got out of the difficulty by answering in very general terms, and by adding that as he had been so short a time in Vienna he had hardly a right to form a judgment. "I believe I understand you," she replied. "I know well that literary taste does not quickly improve. But tell me what is the cause. I have done everything I could according to my knowledge and strength. But I often think, I am only a woman, and in

[1] Briefwechsel, &c., p. 373. [2] Guhrauer, (2) p. 266.

such things a woman cannot achieve much." She afterwards asked whether he would visit Milan with the Prince. On his answering that he would, she said with a cheerful glance, "Then I will give you a letter to Count Firmian. I know he will thank me for this acquaintance." Count Firmian was the Imperial representative at Milan; and before Lessing left Vienna, he received from the Empress the letter she had promised.

At this time Lessing sent away a box which he intended to be taken from Leipzig to Wolfenbüttel. Unfortunately it was lost. It is this box that is generally supposed to have contained his Faust MSS. There is no evidence that it did so; but in a letter to his brother he mentions several valuable papers he had packed in it: among others, the plan of a German dictionary, which for many years he hoped to write.

II.

The first important town the travellers made for was Milan. Here they arrived on May 7; and on the same day Lessing wrote to his brother that his old desire to live and die in Italy had been reawakened, so much had he been pleased by everything he had seen and heard. Nevertheless, he was sorry he had been persuaded to undertake the journey. "There is scarce an hour," he wrote to Frau König,[1] "in which I have not occasion to regret that I did not rather travel with you, for I shall be able to turn my journey to very little advantage, as I am invited everywhere with the Prince, and so all my time passes in visits and at table. To-day we dined with the Archduke. Only the benefit which I may in future derive in Wolfenbüttel from the journey can make this mode of life tolerable to me." In this letter he expresses intense desire to learn how she does—whether she has left Vienna, and when and how—and whether she is "well, thoroughly well." Till he knows this he cannot be perfectly calm. As regards

[1] Sämmtliche Schriften, xii. p. 513.

their future, it will, he hopes, turn out exactly as they wish. "Only continue your love to me, which I do not doubt you will do, but I must not cease to beg you for it, since your love alone can make my happiness in the world."

The next letter Frau König received was from Venice, where they arrived on May 23. Here he was far from well, and announces to her with regret that they are not, as he had hoped, to return from thence to Vienna. "The Prince can and will not let himself be seen in Vienna till everything has there been arranged for him. That is what comes of dealing with princes! One can never reckon upon anything as certain with them; and when they have a man in their clutches, he must remain there whether he will or not." Herr König, it will be remembered, died in Venice. "One of the first things I did here," he writes, "was to go to St. Christoforo to see where our friend lies, and to shed at his grave a sincere tear to his memory. The very man in whose arms he died conducted me; and by him I was assured that he died a perfectly natural death. I know that you were once not without suspicion on this point, and wished that you could be at rest about it. You may now be so. Of a little monument which you must place on his grave, more by word of mouth." He displays more anxiety than ever as to her health and journey. "God grant that this letter may find you nowhere else than in Hamburg, in health and peace among your children! How your journey went I am extremely eager to learn. The whole way I have gone with you rather than with the Prince; that you will believe? If the sacrifice I have made to the Prince is not compensated in another way, I shall regret it all my life. For truly the journey itself is neither a pleasure nor a benefit to me."[1]

Eight days afterwards—on the 10th of June—he writes to her from Florence. The excessive heat has tried him severely, and as he has had only one letter from her since coming to Italy, he is in deep distress, for he greatly fears

[1] S. S. xii. p. 515.

that she must be ill. "I have regretted innumerable times that for the sake of an uncertain prospect I again allowed myself to be at once so far separated from you. And now, if this prospect proves to be altogether delusive—do you observe that I write to you in an hour of despondency? God grant that I do not receive from you unpleasant news when at last news of some kind reaches me. I now console myself only by supposing that you have given your letter to me to Gebler and not to Vokelte, and that the former, not knowing where I am, has caused it to wander about over Italy. For I can scarce imagine that you would not have written to me before your journey. If, however, you have not, you certainly have had other reasons than displeasure with me. That is so? But then I always come back to the terrible thought that you are ill, and very ill. It confuses me so, this thought, that I cannot add a word more."[1]

When this was written Lessing believed that they had begun their return journey, but in reality the visit extended over a period of about eight months. And not till he was travelling back in December did he indirectly hear that Frau König had passed through Brunswick on her way to Hamburg. Through the carelessness of friends in Vienna, to whom her letters were committed, they were never forwarded. During the whole time, therefore, he was haunted by the fear that she was seriously ill, or perhaps dead.[2] This embittered every pleasure, and made him long incessantly to be once more in Germany. Uncertain whether his letters reached her, he himself gave up writing; and she in her turn was rendered miserable by his silence. Occasionally she saw little notices about him in the newspapers, in one of which it was asserted that he meant to spend the winter of 1775–76 in Rome. She at last almost persuaded herself that she was deserted. "Why do you not write to me?" she wrote from Hamburg on November 5.[3] "Have all the excellent things you have seen so im-

[1] S. S. xii. p. 517. [2] S. S. xii. p 517. [3] Briefwechsel, &c., p. 392.

pressed you that they have made you quite forget me? You have assuredly forgotten your last words, when you so solemnly promised to keep my mind calm by frequent letters. You know well that all the sorrow and trouble which can happen to me may be softened by a few lines from you. Why, then, do you neglect me so completely? Perhaps now you think again as you once thought. Would to God, then, that I also could think thus!"

In the middle of July the Prince and his party set sail at Leghorn for Corsica. Of this trip nothing is known except that it lasted rather less than three weeks. On landing at Genoa they made at once for Turin, and there Lessing began what he apparently intended to be a diary. Unfortunately it consists for the most part of dry jottings, put down irregularly and in haste, and conveying nothing like an adequate idea of the impression made upon him by all he saw and heard. It suffices, however, to indicate the routes taken by the travellers; and even from his bare references we can see that no side of the glorious world into which he had been so unexpectedly introduced altogether escaped his notice. He diligently visits the art galleries, the collections of antiquities, the public libraries; he notes the more prominent buildings; he seeks the acquaintance of the leading authors, remarks the progress of literature and science, and is especially attentive to the condition of the theatre. He also alludes to the variations of dialects, and has a slight note on Italian wine and cooking.

Shortly before Lessing's arrival in Turin a controversy had broken out which greatly interested the learned class of Piedmont. An English traveller, Sharpe, had written some unpleasant things respecting the country, and Baretti, Dr. Johnson's friend, had replied to him. This answer had not satisfied Baretti's countrymen; and Vernazza, a writer of Milan, had severely criticised some of his statements. The first note in the diary alludes to this controversy. After some biographical details respecting Baretti,

Lessing remarks that it is not surprising that, after having lived ten years in England, he should have ventured to write in English. "Always, however, they say," he adds, "with the help of his friend Samuel Johnson;" which, if we except a reference in one of his letters to Johnson's Dictionary, is the sole allusion Lessing ever makes to his sturdy English contemporary. As regards the controversy itself, he sides with Baretti on one point. "It is strange that Baretti contradicts so many other travellers who have all found the Piedmontese very gay. And yet I have myself remarked that, at least in Turin, the common people are far more serious and reserved than in other Italian towns. In their market-place, which is full of ballad singers, jugglers, and *improvisatori*, they do, indeed, come together, but without the interest to be found elsewhere in Italy. On Sundays and holidays their public walks are crowded, but all walk up and down quietly, and one sees the throng without hearing it. MM. Vernazza and Denina were obliged to admit this to me, but said that it was true only of Turin, where the neighbourhood of the court and the multitude of informers, especially under the previous Government, made, and still to some extent make, every one careful and reserved."[1]

In reply to Baretti's admission that the people of Piedmont were very uneducated, Vernazza had given a list of learned men. "I do not, however," says Lessing, "believe that the multitude of scholars settles the point. The charge that the people are ignorant may, notwithstanding the scholars, be very well founded."

At the Museum of Antiquities in Turin he remarks, among other things, on the richness of the Egyptian collection. "Next to this are naturally the antiquities which have been dug out in Industria, where, however, they have long ceased to excavate. In the meantime this treasure is the property of the King, from which he can enrich the Museum when and as much as he pleases. It is a pity

[1] S. S. xi. (2), p. 31.

that the peasants, who from time to time find much in their fields, do not bring it to its proper destination, but if it is of value sell it to the goldsmith. It is certain that for more than a century they have driven such a trade, in consequence of which, among other things, a very considerable treasure of gold coins has disappeared. For the inhabitants of the ancient Industria, which the Goths destroyed, appear to have buried all their valuables in wells, in the hope of finding them again." Of various antiquities from Sardinia, he alludes to a floor in mosaic, "representing Orpheus, who attracts the animals to himself by his music, and in which the drawing of the animals is particularly good."[1]

He mentions a number of MSS. he has had the opportunity of studying at the Turin library, in one of which he was the first to discover a treatise by Alberti on painting. Respecting the university, he expresses surprise at the custom of putting at its head as rector a young man of wealth and position, who has just acquired his doctor's degree. "The pretext is that the rector receives a small income, and yet must be in a position to undertake various expenses. It is a strange thing to see at the head of so many old and distinguished men a young Adonis. This year it was a young Count Valperga."[2]

Denina, whose name has just occurred, was at this time a professor at the Turin university. Afterwards he accepted the invitation of Frederick the Great to settle in Berlin, and in a work on Prussian literature makes repeated mention of Lessing. The scholars with whom the latter associated in Turin had often, Denina says, occasion to admire his extensive knowledge of Italian literature. In conversation he expressed great dislike of heroic tragedy, and laid stress on the necessity of a writer often changing his work and the scene of his labours. "He told us that he himself never continued longer than three years at the same occupation." Denina had then in his mind the plan

[1] S. S. xi. (2), p. 34. [2] S. S. xi. (2), p. 36.

of a romance, to be entitled "New Greece," in which he was to describe an imaginary crusade against the Turks for the deliverance of the Greeks. Sulzer, who had shortly before been in Turin, had merely raised some difficulties with regard to the leader of the crusade. Lessing, when the scheme was mentioned to him, exclaimed with great liveliness: "Au nom de Dieu, ne touchez pas à mes Turcs!"[1]

Early in September they set out from Turin for Rome. They remained a day at Alessandria, and then proceeded by Pavia and Piacenza to Parma. Here Lessing visited the Academy of Painters, "where a young English artist, Cowper, was occupied in copying the 'Day' of Correggio." He saw also the library, the theatres, the cathedral, and the churches of S. Giovanni and S. Sepolcro, "on account of the paintings of Correggio." Passing through Modena and Bologna, they reached Rome on the 22d of September. It is easy to understand the feelings with which a man of Lessing's culture and modes of thought must have entered Rome; but the diary indicates no more than that here, as elsewhere, he took full advantage of his opportunities. The places to which he records visits are St. Peter's, the manufactory of mosaic pictures behind St. Peter's, the Villa Medici, the Museum Clementinum, the Vatican Library, the Capitol, with the Museum there, and the Church of Maria degli Angeli. It is said that one day he was long searched for in vain, and was at last found standing before the Laokoon group, earnestly studying it. He was presented, along with the Prince, to Pope Pius VI.; and, if we may believe the writer who records the incident just mentioned, he was so struck by the venerable aspect of the Pope, and so overwhelmed by the recollection of his vast spiritual authority, that he knelt down to kiss the foot of his Holiness. The latter, however, smilingly drew his foot back. According to one account, the Pope merely asked him some questions respecting the Vatican library;

[1] Guhrauer, (2) p. 274.

according to another, they talked for two hours together, the Pope urging Lessing to write a description of Rome.

The Pope's nephew, Cardinal Duca di Nemi Braschi, was so impressed by Lessing that he gave him as a memorial of their conversation a very valuable medal set in antique cameos.

From Rome they went to Naples, which they reached on the 17th of October. Sir William Hamilton—afterwards husband of the Lady Hamilton whom Nelson made famous—was English Ambassador at this court. There are still in the British Museum evidences of his zeal in the collection of works of art; and his writings prove that his artistic knowledge was both various and profound. Lessing inspected his treasures, and alludes especially to his "beautiful head of Augustus." The diary also makes mention of several artists whose studios Lessing visited. One of his little notes proves that certain peculiarities of our countrymen had even then made their mark in Italy. "Gli Inglesi lo vogliono così, say Italian innkeepers when they put false things in their bills." [1]

At Naples the Prince received the intelligence that he had been appointed to a regiment in the Prussian army. He, therefore, returned to Rome, where he found a letter from his father awaiting him, urging him to lose no time in assuming his new duties. The party hastened northwards, and at Munich Lessing said farewell.

It is deeply to be regretted that Lessing had no opportunity of giving to the world any of the results of this important journey. Had he finished "Laokoon," it would undoubtedly have afforded proof of his vastly extended knowledge both of ancient and modern art; and the "Antiquarian Letters," which he still thought of completing, might have been enriched by many new ideas. His future work, however, lay in a wholly different direction; and we must content ourselves with the belief that, notwithstanding his gnawing anxiety respecting her who

[1] S. S. xi. (2), p. 45.

was now more to him than all the rest of the world, his travels had deepened and refreshed his intellectual life, and provided him with memories that helped him over many a dull hour amid his later struggles and sorrows.

III.

From Munich Lessing returned to Vienna, where he found Eva König's letters. He answered them in a way which removed all doubts for ever from her mind as to the depth and continuance of his love. "Thank God," she wrote on January 6, 1776, "that you have happily returned, and that I can welcome you again to Germany as my dear, loyal friend."

He had resolved during this brief second visit to Vienna to have nothing to do with "the great." A friend of his having arrived from Berlin, however, Lessing was obliged to visit him; and this person insisted on introducing him to Prince Kaunitz. The latter invited him to dinner for next day. He excused himself on the ground that he was obliged to leave Vienna next day, and did really leave, although, as he tells Frau König, he would have preferred to remain for a few days longer.

In Dresden he received a flattering welcome from the Elector—afterwards the first King of Saxony—who had many questions to ask him respecting his Italian journey. On Lessing mentioning that he was a Saxon, the Elector remarked that he knew that well, and added, that if Lessing wished to return to his Fatherland, he would have no reason to regret the step. To the chief Minister of the Elector, indeed, Lessing had to promise that if he ever left Wolfenbüttel it would be to Dresden he would come.

For the last time in his life he went to Kamenz, in order to spend a day with his aged mother. The day prolonged itself to four days. It was well that he did not let the opportunity slip, for about a year afterwards she died.

Berlin he also visited for the last time. A letter

written there, on February 11, to Eva König, is somewhat in the old, restless, bitter tone. His friends will not allow him to be a moment alone; he has caught cold, which makes him shudder at the prospect of more travelling; above all, he is anxious as to the future. "God!" the letter concludes, "when will this life come to an end? When shall I be able to live in peace and solitude for you and for myself?"[1]

He had made up his mind that, if possible, he would remain in Wolfenbüttel. To this Frau König had persistently urged him, for she saw with a woman's instinct that a life spent in direct contact with a court, such as he would have to lead in Vienna or Dresden, was unfitted for his manly and independent spirit; and for herself, she vastly preferred the quiet of Wolfenbüttel to the stir and bustle of a great town. But he could not remain on the same terms as before. His debts were still unpaid, and the small income he had hitherto received would be wholly insufficient even for their daily wants. He had, therefore, resolved to come at once to an understanding with the Duke or Prince on his arrival in Brunswick. Doubt as to the issue of the negotiations made him extremely uneasy, and was probably the real cause of his deferring his return considerably longer than he had originally intended. As for Frau König, so much depended for her upon the steps which would now be taken that she was even more anxious than he. "I burn with eagerness," she wrote, "to hear of your arrival, and how you have been received by the Duke."

On the 23d of February he was in Brunswick, and three days later he wrote:[2] "At last, my love, I have happily reached Brunswick again. I say happily! that is, without having received any harm by the journey. Whether I have otherwise come at a happy or an unhappy hour, I know not yet; the next days will show. For as yet I have barely been able to announce myself to the Duke and the

[1] S. S. xii. p. 522. [2] S. S. xii. p. 523.

family, and the Hereditary Prince I have not yet spoken to. Except the latter all have been very pleased to see me, and have received me very graciously; but you know well how little all that implies. . . . If no other occasion offers, I shall wait quietly eight or fourteen days, and then write directly to the Duke that the complete confusion of my affairs compels me to seek an improvement, and that as I do not see how this is to be obtained in Brunswick, I am under the necessity of sending in my resignation. If they wish to do anything for me, they will certainly do it after this declaration. If they have no such wish—why, then, my resignation will be accepted. My love, I cannot think of this future without throwing down the pen."

She was alarmed at this very summary way of setting to work, and wrote begging him by no means to speak to the Duke of "the complete confusion of his affairs." Better simply ask for an increase of salary: a request which, she was sure, would not be refused, while a formal offer of resignation might be taken ill. This letter contains not only striking proof of her good sense but of her delicate tact. If his debts are pressing, she can, she says, at once send him forty or fifty louis d'or—"if," she adds, "you know how to receive them without any one learning about it. You would already have had them if I had known how to arrange it."[1]

Meanwhile the Prince had met Lessing in the street. "He showed himself," wrote Lessing,[2] "very glad to see me again; he assured me that nothing had been said to him of my being near him, and added that it would be necessary to have a talk with me, and that he would infallibly send for me to him if I remained here some days. I answered that I should remain till Sunday. But as yet he has not sent, and will certainly not send. However, I shall keep my word, and not leave for Wolfenbüttel till early on Monday. If he sends, he shall hear everything I have in my mind; if he does not send, he shall have from me at the

[1] Briefwechsel, &c., p. 411. [2] S. S. xii. p. 523.

latest by Wednesday a letter such as he has certainly not often received."

Eight days later he wrote:[1] "I have taken the step which you so very much feared; but I have done it with more caution than you might suppose from my letter. For I applied myself to the Prince, and so plainly laid before him his treatment of me for three years that he must have been extremely piqued. You would perhaps have advised me, my love, not to do this. But it has had its effect. My declaration that I would send in my resignation to the reigning Duke, he by no means expected; and he seems really to wish to do whatever may be necessary to prevent that. I shall send you by next post a copy of my letter, and the original of that of the Prince. You will see from the latter that I must have patience only till his return from Halberstadt. In the meantime I will take no farther step. He comes back on the 27th. So long I am quite willing to wait."

"If I had not," she answered,[2] "valued and loved you before as much as it is possible to love, your letters to the Prince would have made me do so. In reading them I embraced you in thought a hundred times."

Immediately after the Prince's return he sent a messenger, who had always been a good friend of Lessing, to make proposals. He was offered an addition to his salary of 200 thalers; there were to be no deductions from his income, and those hitherto made were to be returned; on the security of the increase he was to receive a loan of 800 or 1000 thalers; he was to obtain more suitable lodging or compensation in money. The Duke had spent a vast fortune on a single mistress, whom he maintained in splendour befitting a queen; and this was all he could do for the man whose association with him now gives him his sole claim to immortality. Lessing, however, was not exacting, and expressed his willingness to accept the terms offered him; only, the Prince would have to offer them himself, for,

[1] S. S. xii. p. 526. [2] Briefwechsel, &c., p. 418.

he proudly explained, he would not have the smallest request lost. Moreover, as the improvement was slight, he would consider himself in no way bound to refuse any more favourable offer that might come from some other quarter.

Whether, as Lessing supposed, the Prince was not favourably disposed towards him, or whether he acted from mere thoughtlessness, several months passed without a final decision being arrived at; and once more the sorely tried pair suffered all the agonies of uncertainty and of dear hope deferred. Her health sometimes gave way, and it was with an effort that he kept himself from becoming moody and angry. At last, in June, the arrangement originally suggested was agreed to; and the Duke insisted at the same time upon conferring on Lessing the title of Hofrath. To such an honour, it need scarce be said, he was wholly indifferent. "What you will most wonder at, perhaps," he wrote, "is that I could not help accepting the title of Hofrath. That I did not seek it, you will readily believe: that I said in very plain German what I thought of it, you will also believe. But I had in the end to be careful not to insult the old Duke."[1]

There are now for a time no more sad letters. Each is as little inclined as ever to indulge in rapturous exclamations; but there is a brightness in their words, like the clear shining after rain, which contrasts delightfully with the previous gloom. In August he went to Hamburg to make preliminary arrangements for their marriage. "I advise you," she wrote a little before,[2] "to lodge in the Kaysershof. There is some danger in that for me, for the landlady is a very pretty woman, but I can observe you the more closely! I will only beg beforehand that you will be my guest daily at dinner: your landlord will suffer nothing by that, as he is also my landlord." When he returned to Wolfenbüttel he had many small matters to attend to which were strangely out of his line. "Do not

[1] S. S. xii. p. 544. [2] Briefwechsel, &c., p. 444.

forget," she wrote,[1] "to tell me what wages a housemaid receives there. That is no commission for you. But who else can tell me?" He conscientiously informs her that he has found a good cook, who, however, asks thirty thalers a year. A housemaid, he adds, can be obtained for ten or twelve thalers a year, with four or five thalers "beer-money."

A house adjoining the library and belonging to the Duke had recently become vacant; and this was offered to Lessing. He was afraid she would not find it suitable, but she replied:[2] "However old-fashioned and small it is, I would not exchange it for a palace in the town. At a distance I would lose the privilege of being able to visit you in the library. For that I would willingly face some discomfort." They ultimately settled there; and the house still stands, essentially the same as when Lessing occupied it. It is a quaint little building of a single storey, roofed with red tiles. It forms three sides of a court, entered by a gateway; and opposite it and the library, beyond a wide space with trees, is the old castle. Behind is the room in which, during the last years of his life, Lessing worked, with his cat purring beside him on the large oak table. This room opens into a pleasant garden; and in the calm of a summer afternoon one readily persuades oneself that it is a home a scholar of modest tastes would love. A nature like Lessing's, however, full of life and energy, soon exhausts the charms of mere calm.

They were married on the 8th of October, 1776, when Lessing had reached the mature age of forty-seven, and his bride probably that of thirty-nine or forty. But both had that youthfulness of spirit which is independent of years, and which in some finely touched natures is uninjured by the blows and shocks of fortune. The ceremony took place at the house of a friend of the bride on an estate near Hamburg. Except the family inhabiting the house and her brother-in-law there were no guests; and Lessing, as if

[1] Briefwechsel, &c., p. 455. [2] Briefwechsel, &c., p. 469.

to show how lightly he esteemed the mere form, did not even provide himself with a new coat. Soon afterwards he wrote to his sister:[1] "My wife is in every respect what I long ago wished that my wife should be: heartily good and upright, as we always knew our mother towards our father." And to his brother Karl, who in a few months followed his example:[2] "If I assure you that I have always considered her the only woman in the world with whom I could trust myself to live, you will readily believe that she has everything I seek in a wife. If I am not happy with her, I should certainly have been much more unhappy with any other. In short, come to us in summer and see."

[1] S. S. xii. p. 569.

[2] S. S. xii. p. 570.

CHAPTER XXII.

DEATH OF LESSING'S WIFE.

FOR a time it seemed as if fortune were about to make up amply to Lessing for the many hardships of the past few years. A little before his marriage the Elector Palatine had sent him the diploma of an ordinary member of the Mannheim Academy of Sciences: an institution which had been founded about thirteen years before. This was not in itself a very lofty honour, but associated with it was the solid advantage of a pension of five hundred thalers a year; and in return all that was professedly expected was that he should attend a meeting of the Academy at least once every two years, and contribute to the transactions once annually. He willingly consented to these conditions, and obtained the assent of the Duke of Brunswick to the arrangement.

The person who had brought about this apparently satisfactory result was Herr von Hompesch, the chief Minister of the Elector; and it soon became clear that he was not animated by quite such generous motives as had been at first supposed. One of the schemes of this "statesman" was to give splendour to his sovereign's little court, and to make his own position doubly sure, by founding at Mannheim a national theatre which should far surpass any dramatic undertaking that had yet been attempted in Germany. Who so well fitted to aid him in the fulfilment of his purpose as Lessing, the first dramatist of the day, and incomparably the greatest dramatic critic? The pension was but a decoy by which he hoped to allure to

Mannheim one who could be of such essential service to him. The idea of associating himself with the drama was still deeply repugnant to Lessing; but he could hardly refuse such help as he was in a position to render, and he accordingly not only aided the Minister by his advice, but put himself to a great deal of trouble in attempting to bring together from all parts of Germany the best actors he could secure. Early in 1777, when he was naturally very unwilling to leave home, he went to Mannheim. Here he remained for six weeks, and worked hard for the new enterprise; but the more he saw of the court, which was dominated by the most reactionary ecclesiastical influences, and the more clearly he perceived the real intention of Herr von Hompesch, the less he was disposed to give up Wolfenbüttel for a position in which he would never be able to enjoy a day of peace. On his return home, therefore, he finally declined a formal invitation to settle in the Palatinate.

And now came a stroke which affords striking evidence as to the public morality of the petty people who for the most part had Germany in their grasp in the eighteenth century. The Minister affected to believe that Lessing had not only refused this invitation, but had given up the pension which had been formerly conferred upon him; and it was forthwith withdrawn. Lessing was deeply disappointed, for the addition to his income had been as welcome as it was unexpected; but he took good care not to let his disappointment be seen. Even at a time, however, when the word of princes and their agents was accepted as absolute, he would not in silence submit to injustice. He, therefore, sent Herr von Hompesch a reply which neither that nobleman nor his master can have found agreeable reading. Its firm dignity recalls the equally famous letter of Dr. Johnson to Chesterfield: only, it was incomparably easier for a citizen of free England to speak the truth to a lord than for a citizen of enslaved Germany to do the like by the Minister of a reigning Prince.

"I must not longer be a debtor to your Excellency for yours of April 7, since I wait in vain for more exact intelligence as to the affairs of Seyler, which might perhaps throw some light upon my own. Truly I greatly need such light, in order neither to be unjust to your Excellency nor to lay myself open to the charge that I allow myself to be wantonly treated as a child, with deceit and intrigue. For it is only a child, to whom one does not wish to fulfil a promise, whose words one twists so as to make it believe that it has of its own free will absolved us of the promise. The child feels the injustice, but, because it is a child, knows not how to explain it. If your Excellency does not consider me such a child, I am content. I shall also be on my guard against troubling any one with an explanation of so trifling a business. Only one right in regard to this matter I must reserve. I did not travel to Mannheim without the knowledge of the Duke of Brunswick, in whose service I am. I was obliged to tell him the promises you had made me, which I could not hesitate to accept. If he learns that nothing has come of these promises, what shall I say to him? Tell him step by step how the matter has gone? Lay before him the letters exchanged with your Excellency and others on the subject, and leave him to judge as he may? The Duke, however, will hardly be so curious; and it is something quite different I am anxious about. As at the present time so much is written about the German theatre, as the Mannheim theatre has already been mentioned in the calendars and journals without my being forgotten, it is not to be supposed that these notices will cease, and my name may be mixed up with them. Here I must confess a weakness to your Excellency: I forgive a thousand spoken words sooner than a single printed word. At the first syllable which any one ever prints respecting my share in the Mannheim theatre, and which is not in accordance with the facts, I shall let the public know the whole story. For it must have pleased your Excellency to joke with me

when you expressed a hope 'that I would not leave the Mannheim stage altogether to its fate, but would visit it from time to time.' I force myself to nothing, and to throw myself at the head of people who, although they first sought me, either will not or cannot treat me properly, would be to me quite impossible. Your Excellency will pardon my frankness." [1]

Seyler, who is mentioned in the first sentence of this letter, was the same who had been so closely connected with the Hamburg National Theatre. Lessing, having full powers, had engaged him for Mannheim; but when he came there, he found that his place had already been given to another. Ultimately he received a thousand thalers as compensation. The magnificent compensation sent to Lessing was—a gilt case containing thirty copper coins illustrative of the history of the Palatinate.

Notwithstanding the irritation caused by this incident, all accounts agree in representing the year which followed Lessing's marriage as by far the happiest of his life. He found more and more reason to admire and love his wife; and her four children—three sons and a daughter—brought life and bustle to his home. Amalia, or Malchen, her daughter, had always been a favourite of his, and he became deeply attached to her as she grew towards womanhood. With the boys he associated almost as an equal, taking part in their games and encouraging them to treat him with perfect confidence. Only twice did he administer chastisement: when one of them told him a lie, and again when the same culprit failed to defend himself against the attack of another boy. On both these occasions the offence was punished by a box on the ear.

Although the united incomes of husband and wife did not amount to much, Frau Lessing knew how to give an air of refinement to their home. He would often, unexpectedly, bring a visitor from the library to dinner, but she was never taken by surprise. Both were of a hospitable

[1] S. S. xii. p. 579.

nature; and Lessing made his table highly popular, for the conversation was always animated, and he liked the whole family to take part in it. He became extremely regular in his habits. Punctually every morning he rose at six; and if business did not take him to the library, he remained in his room at work till midday. At half-past twelve came dinner. In the afternoon he took a walk, generally in the company of a friend, round the wall of the town; and the evening was given up to any occupation or amusement that might happen to present itself. He was always glad to welcome friends, and there were few things he enjoyed more than a game of chess or cards. Between ten and eleven every one in the house was in bed.

In the spring of 1777, Spittler, afterwards a famous historian, but then a young man, spent some time in Wolfenbüttel; and fortunately a letter has been preserved in which he communicated, immediately after his departure, his impressions of Lessing and his wife. "I was nearly three weeks in Wolfenbüttel, and they were three of the happiest and most instructive of my life, as Lessing gave me free entrance to his house and full use of the library. I know not whether you are acquainted with Lessing personally. I can assure you that he is the greatest friend of man, the most active promoter of all learning, the most helpful and affable patron. Without remarking it, a visitor becomes so intimate with him that he almost forgets with what a great man he has to do; and if it were possible to find still more humanity, still more active benevolence than in Lessing, it would be in Lessing's wife. Another such woman I never hope to know. Such unstudied goodness of heart!—always full of a divine calm of soul, she communicates it, by the most enchanting sympathy, to all who have the happiness to be in her society. The example of this great and admirable woman has infinitely raised my ideas of her sex; and yet I was, perhaps, far too short a time in Wolfenbüttel to become acquainted with all her qualities."[1]

[1] Gubrauer, (2) p. 301.

The same idea is conveyed by a letter written to him by Mendelssohn in November, 1777, from Hanover: "I shall not fail to come to you to Wolfenbüttel. Assuredly no kind of business shall prevent me, for indeed there is nothing I so eagerly desire as to see you and talk with you. You now seem to me in a calmer, more satisfied position, which harmonises infinitely better with my modes of thought than the clever but somewhat bitter humour I thought I remarked in you some years ago. I was not strong enough to beat down the violence of this humour, but I heartily wished that time and circumstances and your own reason might do it. It seems to me—and everything I see and hear of you confirms me in the pleasant idea—that my wish is now fulfilled. I must of necessity talk to you in this your better state of feeling, if it were only to learn what has most contributed to this change: your wife, or freemasonry? better reason, or riper years?"[1]

Mendelssohn came, and we do not need to be told how Lessing in his new circumstances enjoyed the society of his noble-hearted friend: the only man except Kleist who had ever won his whole heart. Frau Lessing's eldest son, who had an ambition to be a Prussian soldier, accompanied the philosopher back to Berlin.

Lessing's happiness was still in its spring-time, and he looked forward to a full and gracious summer; but a sudden blight fell upon it, and he was left more desolate than before. Some weeks after Mendelssohn's departure, a son was born, and died the same day; and the mother's life was despaired of. How fiercely his spirit rebelled against this blow of fate may be seen from a letter he addressed on the 3d of January, 1778, to his friend Eschenburg: surely one of the most bitter and terrible cries ever wrung from humanity.[2]

"I seize the moment in which my wife lies without

[1] Guhrauer, (2) p. 301. [2] S. S. xii. p. 597.

consciousness to thank you for your kind interest. My pleasure was but brief. And I lost him so unwillingly, this son! For he had so much understanding! so much understanding! Do not suppose that the few hours of my fatherhood have made me an ape of a father! I know what I say. Was it not understanding, that they had to drag him into the world with iron tongs? that he so soon suspected the evil of it? Was it not understanding, that he seized the first opportunity to get away from it? And the little rascal tears his mother from me with him! For there is still small hope that she will be preserved to me. I wished to have things as well as other men. But I have badly succeeded."

For a week it was uncertain whether she was to live or die, but on the 10th Eschenburg received the following:[1]—

"My wife is dead; this experience also I have now passed through. I rejoice that there cannot be many more such experiences left for me, and am quite easy. It is also well that I may feel assured of your sympathy and that of our other friends."

These letters are preserved in the Wolfenbüttel library. They are written in a clear, firm hand, and it is difficult at first sight to realise the storm of passion of which they were once the living symbols. The more deeply Lessing's feelings were stirred, the more absolute was his control of their expression.

On the 17th he buried her who had been the object of so many hopes, and for fourteen brief months had shed radiance over his life. On his return from the grave this is how he wrote to his brother Karl:[2]

"What a sad messenger to my stepson I must make you! And, indeed, I know that your kind brother's heart may itself have need to be prepared. His good mother, my wife, is dead. If you had known her! But they say

[1] S. S. p. xii. 600.

[2] S. S. xii. p. 600.

it is only self-praise to praise one's wife. Good: I shall say nothing farther of her. But if you had known her! You will, I fear, never see me again as our friend Moses found me: so calm, so contented within my four walls!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

"STURM UND DRANG."

A TIME came, as we have seen, when Lessing was almost too successful in his endeavour to deliver his countrymen from the intellectual supremacy of France. Germany was now in the midst of this period. The young dramatists of the day scorned not only the laws of the French drama but all laws, and instead of the cold platitudes which prevailed while Gottsched ruled the national taste, had adopted a style that expressed only wild and tumultuous passion. The play which has given its name to the whole epoch—by Klinger—is a true representative of the class of works to which it belonged. The author thinks every feeling unworthy of notice that cannot be pitched in a high key; and so long as sensation is provided in ample measure, he is indifferent to the consistency and truth of the characters, to the orderly progress of the action. At a time when such a play was accepted as a work of splendid talent, Aristotle, of whom Lessing had made so much, was naturally looked upon as a tyrant, to whom intellectual slaves alone would admit the least allegiance; and Lessing himself, although the boldest had a wholesome dread of his clear thought and cutting satire, was regarded as a ruthless enemy of the claims of genius. "Genius" was the watchword of the age. Every lad who was conscious of vehement sensations and burning ambition fancied he had a right to this title; and if a man had genius, to what power on earth could he be expected to yield submission? "Nature, nature!" was the cry everywhere heard.

"Act as you like, think as you like, feel and write as you like; never mind the critics; scorn every one who advises the slightest check on the vehemence of your aspirations; everything that is in you bring forth exactly as you experience it, and the more violent and outrageous the manner in which you do so, the more sure you may be that you are on the right track." It was with counsel of this kind that the "geniuses" encouraged each other to more and more startling strokes of the eccentricity and vanity which they were pleased to consider unmistakable proofs of original power.

That Lessing could have no sympathy with a movement of this kind will be obvious to all who have thus far followed his progress. Nothing could have been farther from his intention than to encourage writers to indulge in furious license; and the more the "Sturm und Drang" poets rose in popular favour, the more disgusted he became not only with them, but with everything relating to the theatre. At last, whenever the theatre was the subject of conversation in his presence, he deliberately went to sleep; for all his life he possessed the power of sleeping at any moment he chose to close his eyes. On being awaked, he would say, wearily, "You bore me!"

The "Sturm und Drang" excitement would have been long ago forgotten but for one circumstance: it was shared by Goethe, and moulded "Götz von Berlichingen," the work with which, in 1773, he opened his career. This play was received with almost unbounded enthusiasm, and even in Berlin, which had hitherto cared for nothing that did not bear the stamp of France, it was represented amid frantic manifestations of delight. Almost a year passed after its publication before Lessing read it; and then he was far from sharing the general opinion of its merits. "That 'Götz von Berlichingen,'" he wrote to his brother,[1] "has obtained great applause in Berlin, is, I fear, to the honour neither of the author nor of Berlin. Meil [who had carefully arranged the costumes and decorations] has

[1] Sämmtliche Schriften, xii. p. 492.

undoubtedly had the chief hand in it. For a town which runs after feeble melodies can also run after pretty dresses!" After Lessing's visit to Leipzig in the early part of 1775, Weisse, with whom he had talked freely on all the subjects of the day, wrote to Garve: "With the new plays of Goethe and his associate Lenz he was extremely dissatisfied. A little wit and humour, he said, was of the same value in his esteem as a little virtue of temperament; and he must have a poor head who, if he will submit to no laws, cannot invent a situation or a humorous scene; a beautiful, thought-out plan, the proper management of the situations, and the suitable development of well-conceived characters, demanded more genius." A little before this he had written to Karl Lessing that if he had still any interest in the drama he would "run some danger of becoming wild at the prevailing anarchy, and of attacking Goethe in spite of his genius, of which he makes so much."[1]

It was impossible that a play without definite plan, however brilliant, should satisfy a critic who demanded unity of action as an essential condition of all dramatic work; but that Lessing recognised the broad line of distinction which marked off the author of "Götz" from all other poets of the time there can be no doubt. Their extravagance was the extravagance of feebleness; Goethe's was the extravagance of immature power. Five years after the play appeared Lessing was in a bookseller's shop in Brunswick glancing over the new books. He took up a tragedy, "Julius of Tarento," and was so pleased with it that he read it through. He expressed his belief to Eschenburg that it was by Goethe. Eschenburg did not feel so sure. "So much the better," said Lessing; "there is in that case another genius besides Goethe who can do something."

"Werther," as all the world knows, excited even deeper admiration than "Götz." Certain literary qualities of this work Lessing genuinely appreciated. "A thousand

[1] S. S. xii. p. 498.

thanks," he wrote to Eschenburg, who had lent him the book, "for the pleasure you have given me by sending me Goethe's romance. I return it a day earlier that others may enjoy this pleasure—the sooner the better." He added, however: "If so warm a product is not to do more harm than good, do you not think that it should have a cool little epilogue? A hint how Werther came to possess so adventurous a character; how another youth to whom nature has given the same tendencies may be on his guard against them, since such a youth might easily take poetical for moral beauty, and believe that the man must be good who so strongly excites our interest. And that he certainly was not; if our Jerusalem's mind had been of this temper I should have been compelled almost to despise him. Do you suppose that a Roman or Greek youth would ever have taken his life thus and for this reason? Certainly not. They knew how to protect themselves very differently from the enthusiasm of love; and in the time of Sokrates they would scarce have pardoned a young girl for an ἐξ ἔρωτος κατοχή which had driven to τι τολμᾷν παρὰ φύσιν. The production of such little great, contemptibly valuable originals was reserved for Christian education, which so beautifully transforms a physical necessity into a spiritual perfection. Therefore, dear Goethe, another little chapter to end with, and the more cynical the better!"[1]

There is not in all Lessing's correspondence a more characteristic passage than this. We have seen how capable he was of a deep and noble love; but sentimentalism of all kinds was utterly foreign to him. A lover who shot himself because his mistress happened to be beyond his reach could not but seem to him a small and poor nature.

It has been argued that the real motive of Werther's suicide is not hopeless love but general weariness of life. And that Goethe was thinking of this not less than of Lotte is true, for it was one of the marks of the epoch

[1] S. S. xii. p. 496.

that youth pleased itself by absolutely refusing to be happy. The world was once for all pronounced the most miserable of possible worlds, and any one who found it even a tolerable place to live in was scarce considered worthy of contempt. Ardent and eager minds longed for knowledge deeper, more intimate than is within the range of the human faculties; they thirsted for passion more intense than is aroused in the actual relations of life. And it was to a large extent because Werther shared the restless discontent of the time that the work at once became so popular. But he is no more raised to the dignity of a tragic hero by his disgust at the universe than by the fact of his giving his affections to a woman who chooses to be loyal to her husband. For his disgust is not the feeling of a serious man who has thought deeply of the problems of life; it arises from the disappointment of a feeble and morbid nature which asks more of existence than it is capable of giving; which, in short, cries for the moon. Werther, notwithstanding the true poetry with which his history is unfolded, is so purely a sentimentalist that he is rather a character for comedy than for tragedy; and Lessing actually began to sketch a comedy entitled "Werther the Better" ("Werther, der Bessere"). We possess, however, only the outline of one scene; and this is too slight to give us an idea of the manner in which he proposed to handle his theme.

The belief was universal at the time that Goethe had merely reproduced the character and story of young Jerusalem, whose suicide had excited deep and general pity. Lessing had no reason to doubt that this view was correct, and as Jerusalem, during nearly a year spent in Wolfenbüttel, had won his esteem and affection, he was indignant at the travesty of his friend's character. In the letter, part of which has been already quoted, Weisse wrote: "He was in the highest degree angry at 'The Sorrows of Young Werther,' and maintained that the character of young Jerusalem was altogether misrepresented; he was by no

means a sentimental fool, but a true, thoughtful, cool philosopher. Lessing himself possesses some very penetrating essays by him upon the immortality of the soul, the vocation of man, &c., which he intends soon to publish with an introduction; he has already written to the father and asked permission. In short, I perceive that he will one day suddenly spring upon Goethe's neck, as formerly upon Klotz; but as Goethe is not without horns, he will certainly defend himself." [1] The essays were published in 1776; and although in the introduction "Werther" is not once mentioned, it is obvious throughout that the intention of the writer is altogether to dissociate Jerusalem from the character with which he had been identified. Lessing speaks of his "desire for clear thought, his talent for pursuing truth into its last hiding-places. His was a spirit of cool observation. But a warm spirit—and so much the more valuable—which did not let itself be terrified when truth sometimes evaded his pursuit." "How sensible, how warm, how energetic, was this young subtle inquirer, how entirely a man among men he was, his other friends know still better than I. I accept everything they tell me of him. But why will some of them not believe me that this fiery spirit did not constantly sparkle and blaze, but steadily fed itself beneath calm and lukewarm ashes; that his heart, always occupied, did not occupy itself to the disadvantage of the higher powers; that his head could be as little satisfied by light without warmth as by warmth without light?" [2]

It is now known that Goethe had no intention of picturing Jerusalem in Werther, and made use only of one or two incidents in his career. But Lessing was perfectly justified in defending his friend against universal misunderstanding, and the generous eagerness with which he did so was an important revelation of a very fine side of his own character.

In the remaining part of Lessing's life we find only one

[1] Guhrauer, (2) p. 97. [2] S. S. x. p. 4.

more allusion to a work by Goethe; and that, as we shall see, was altogether favourable. He never, however, perceived how great and radiant was the star which, in Goethe, had floated into view. It must be remembered that he had before him only the works of Goethe's youth; for the latter had settled in Weimar in 1775, and for ten years the voice which had charmed all Europe was no more heard. Goethe, on the other hand, was still a young man when the task of Lessing's life was achieved, and he had a full understanding of all that the author of "Laokoon" and "Nathan" had done for his nation. "Less than a quarter of an hour before I heard of his death," wrote Goethe to Frau von Stein, "I formed a plan for visiting Lessing. We lose much, much in him, more than we believe."

A writer more or less associated with the "Sturm und Drang" poets was Lavater, to whom Goethe for some time in his youth looked up as almost a being of a higher order. By his work on "Physiognomy" he stirred extravagant hopes of a new epoch in human history, for he professed to unfold an absolute method of penetrating to the deepest secrets of character. This was exactly the sort of science that was certain to attract the admirers of Klinger and Lenz. It had the appearance of extraordinary profundity; and at the same time it enabled every one to flatter himself that some particular feature gave him vast superiority over his fellow-men. The system thus attracted an incredible amount of attention, and even many cool thinkers were almost persuaded to accept what all the world was proclaiming to be true. Lessing remained unmoved. In his translation of Huarte he had long before treated of the subject; and he never doubted that the qualities of the mind are to some extent indicated by the body. But he controlled his judgments too strictly by reference to facts to admit the exact correspondence between body and mind for which Lavater argued.

His position towards Basedow, the enthusiast for education, was very much the same. The "Emile" of Rousseau

had made education one of the most popular subjects of the day; and the demand for "nature" here was as urgent as in the world of literature. Basedow was the representative in Germany of the new ideas, and multitudes, including (for a time) no less an authority than Kant, believed that his schemes were destined forthwith to regenerate the race. That Lessing was fully alive to the supreme importance of education, and perceived the necessity of a profound change in the ordinary methods of training youth, we have already seen in dealing with the "Literary Letters." But he had little faith in speedy regeneration of any kind, and believed that serious mischief is done by the rousing of expectations which are sure to be shattered in the long-run against the hard and uncompromising facts of the world.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"THE WOLFENBÜTTEL FRAGMENTS."

I.

It has been already mentioned that in the early part of the eighteenth century the doubts of the English Deists respecting the traditional system of religious belief found occasional expression in Germany. Leibnitz was an ardent defender of orthodox dogmas, but his alliance was looked upon with suspicion by Christian teachers. "He has expressed more finely," said a German prelate, "exactly what Bayle said in plainer terms."[1] The "enlightened" philosophers, of whom Dippel and Edelmann were among the earliest representatives, made no pretence of allegiance to the Church. The "healthy human understanding" was the only authority they recognised; and by its means they supposed it possible to reach an absolute system of truth, of which belief in a personal God and in the immortality of the soul was the main element. Christianity was to them an imposture, the priest the chief enemy of mankind. Wolf talked much of the necessity of a Revelation, but he made its communication subject to so many conditions that the majority of his followers naturally questioned its possibility, and contented themselves with Theism. All the later "enlightened" philosophers—Mendelssohn ranks as one of the best of them—started from Wolf's doctrine, interpreted in the freest sense. Many of them, however, were largely influenced by the French Materialists, who, after the accession of Frederick II., became a great power

[1] Biedermann, ii. p. 265.

in Germany, especially in Prussia. They made it the fashion among freethinkers to look upon faith as something to be hated or laughed at rather than as a subject of serious inquiry.

The Protestant clergy could not, of course, be indifferent to an agitation of this kind, and many of them came forward as the champions of Christianity. The rigidly orthodox refused to make a single concession; but a large and powerful party were deeply influenced by the opponents with whom they contended. Their object was to prove that the received religion was in complete harmony with philosophy; that, indeed, philosophy led to the received religion as its inevitable consequence. Hence the more perplexing and difficult elements of the orthodox creed were toned down or explained away; only those parts of it which were supposed capable of rational and intelligible statement were thrust into prominence. The result was a system neither strictly orthodox nor strictly philosophical. It occurred to no one to take up a position similar to that of Bishop Butler, who sought but slightly to soften the harshness of his theological convictions, and simply pointed out that the arguments by which these were supposed to be refuted told against natural religion quite as powerfully as against Christianity. Germany was for a long time far less fortunate than England in the character both of those who assailed and those who defended the Church. Neither party thoroughly understood the conditions of the conflict, or carried it on with perfectly tempered weapons.

Up to the last years of his life it was not publicly known that Lessing paid the smallest attention to theology; but one so immersed in the life of his own time was not likely to be indifferent to anything which deeply stirred the most serious of his contemporaries.[1] He himself has left on

[1] Lessing's theological writings have formed the subject of a good deal of controversy in Germany. "Lessing als Theologe," by Carl Schwarz, is an admirably written volume: clear, learned, and thorough. Suggestive hints will be found in Hebler's "Lessingstudien," and in the chapter

record the best proof that when he entered the theological arena he did not do so unprepared. "The best part of my life," he wrote in a treatise on Bibliolatry, which he never finished,[1] "was passed at a time—fortunately or unfortunately?—in which writings for the truth of the Christian religion were to some extent the fashion. Now, fashionable writings, simply because they are fashionable, are so eagerly and generally read, that every one who is at all given to reading feels ashamed if he also does not peruse them. What wonder, therefore, that my reading took this direction, and that I soon could not rest until I had devoured every new product in this department? . . . By-and-by I sought every new work against religion quite as eagerly, and gave it the same patient, impartial hearing which I formerly believed due only to writings in support of religion. So it continued for a considerable time. I was dragged from one side to the other; neither quite satisfied me. . . . The more decisive the writers on both sides became—and they became so very much at the same rate: the most recent were always the most positive, the most contemptuous—the more I felt that the effect each produced upon me was not the desired effect. It often seemed to me that the combatants, as in the fable of Death and Love, had changed weapons. The more convincingly the one wished to prove Christianity to me, the more doubtful I became. The more courageously and triumphantly the other sought to bring it to the ground, the more inclined I felt at least to maintain it sincerely in my heart."

Traces of his early inquiries may be seen in the letter to his father soon after he made his escape from the Leipzig university, in which he asserts that "the Christian religion is not something which a man can accept on the word of

on Lessing in Hettner's "Literaturgeschichte des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts." "Le Christianisme moderne, étude sur Lessing," by Ernest Fontanès, is agreeably written, but it adds little to the reasonings and conclusions of Schwarz.

[1] Sämmtliche Schriften, xi. (2), p. 170.

his parents;" in the reviews belonging to the same period, in which he emphasises the importance of the practical element in religion; in the essay on Cardan, in which he puts into the mouth of a Mohammedan the most telling arguments against Christianity; in the controversy with Cramer and Basedow, in which he maintains that morality is independent of dogmatic belief. We have seen that in Breslau, while engaged in practical duty and thinking out "Laokoon" and "Minna," he found time for the study of Spinoza and the Christian fathers. At the same period he sketched an elaborate work on the rapid spread of Christianity in the first four centuries. It was then, as now, a favourite argument for the Christian religion that it could not without supernatural intervention have so soon triumphed over so many obstacles. Lessing, apparently only for the satisfaction of his own mind, entered into a full examination of the whole question, arriving at the conclusion that the facts may be explained by strictly natural causes.

In Hamburg he was probably too much occupied with purely literary undertakings, and too much harassed by petty and constantly recurring cares, to think a great deal of theology; and he seems to have become thoroughly tired of following the progress of current controversy. "As regards the *pro* and *contra* of religion," he wrote to Ebert in 1768, "I am as sick of the one as of the other. Rather write on engraved gems; you will certainly do little good, but at any rate you will do little harm." In the quiet of Wolfenbüttel he returned seriously to theological study; and the judgments he had long before reached took firm shape and were grounded on a deep and solid basis.

How completely he had broken with the orthodox faith is proved by a little paper on "The Origin of Revealed Religion," which was probably written before he went to Breslau, and certainly cannot have been written long after his settlement there. He traces the rise of positive faiths to

the fact that men have found it necessary at various times to come to an understanding as to the proper manner of exercising natural religion. "Hence all positive and revealed religions are equally true and equally false. Equally true, inasmuch as it has been everywhere necessary to compare certain things, in order to secure harmony and unity in public religion. Equally false, inasmuch as the things compared are not essential, but weaken and oppress what is essential. The best revealed and positive religion is that which contains the fewest conventional additions to natural religion; that which least limits the effects of natural religion."[1] No one will pretend that this is a satisfactory or even perfectly intelligible theory; and at a later date Lessing would not have accepted it as anything like an adequate exposition of his ideas. He never, however, wavered in his conviction that all positive creeds are due to the action of strictly natural influences. And sometimes he allowed himself to use very decided language in respect to orthodox Christianity. Urging Mendelssohn, in 1771, to answer plainly some attacks of Lavater, he wrote: "In this matter you alone can thus speak and write, and are, therefore, infinitely more fortunate than other honest people, who can help the downfall of the most frightful structure of nonsense only under the pretext of giving it a new foundation."[2]

Yet he always retained a certain respect for the strictly orthodox creed. He vastly preferred the clear and fearless tones of its defenders to the weak and uncertain utterances of the theologians who posed as generous and impartial thinkers. The men of the old school were at least logical, and any one who argued with them knew exactly what were the positions they intended to maintain. Their freer brethren cared little for consistency of thought, and were skilful in the art of beating a retreat at the very points where they might have been expected to hold out with the utmost vigour and determination.

[1] S. S. xii. (2), p. 248. [2] S. S. xii. p. 338.

His first open approach to the treatment of theological questions was in the treatise on Berengarius. This was, indeed, of a purely historical nature; but it prepared the public for his later work. He came nearer to his goal in two papers, published in his "Contributions to History and Literature," in 1773, on certain theories of Leibnitz. The first of these related to the doctrine of eternal punishments; the second to the doctrine of the Trinity. Both doctrines were favourite objects of attack to the freethinkers of the time; but here Lessing gave forth words of Leibnitz in which they were upheld, and defended him against the charge of having maintained them merely out of deference to prevailing opinion. Lessing's friends were still more shocked than they had been by the satisfaction his "Berengarius" had given the Lutheran divines; and his brother wrote to him as if his intention had merely been to flatter the orthodox. "What have I to do with the orthodox?" Lessing replied. "I despise them as much as you do; but I despise still more our new-fashioned clergy, who are far too little of theologians and not nearly philosophers enough."

In a later letter to his brother he took up the same line:[1] "I grudge that one should seek to enlighten the world? I do not heartily wish that every one should think rationally respecting religion? I should detest myself if I had any other aim than to promote these great objects. Let me, however, do this in my own way. And what is simpler than this way? I do not wish to keep the impure water, which has long ceased to be fit for use; I only do not wish to see it poured away before we know where to obtain purer; I only do not wish that it should be poured away without consideration whether or not the child is thereafter to be bathed in a more filthy liquid. And what is our new-fashioned theology as opposed to orthodoxy except a more filthy liquid as opposed to impure water? With orthodoxy, thank God, we were pretty well done; there had

[1] S. S. xii. p. 484.

been drawn between it and philosophy a curtain behind which each could go on its way without hindering the other.[1] But what is now done? They tear down the curtain, and under the pretence of making us rational Christians make us extremely irrational philosophers. I beg you, dear brother, inform yourself better on this point, and look somewhat less at that which our new theologians throw away than at that which they wish to put in its place. We are agreed in considering our old religious system untrue, but I could not say with you that it is a patchwork made by bunglers and half philosophers. I know nothing in the world in which human penetration has been more displayed and practised than in this. A patchwork made by bunglers and half philosophers is the religious system which they now wish to put in the place of the old, and with far more influence upon reason and philosophy than the old arrogates to itself. And yet you misconstrue me in defending the old? My neighbour's house threatens to fall in ruins. If my neighbour wishes to carry it away, I will honestly help him. He will not, however, carry it away, but to the complete ruin of my house insists on building under it and propping it up. He must stop that, or I shall treat his falling house exactly as if it were my own." "I prefer," he wrote at a still later period, again to his brother, "the old orthodox (fundamentally tolerant) theology to the newer (fundamentally intolerant) theology, because the former openly conflicts with the healthy human understanding, and the latter rather seeks to confuse it. I ally myself with my open enemies in order to be able to be better on my guard against my secret foes."[2]

[1] Lessing means that orthodox theologians appealed to faith, not reason; hence they did not necessarily disturb themselves about the efforts of philosophy. The modern theologians, however, by making the task of theology the same as that of philosophy, hampered the free movement of both. The device of sharply distinguishing the realms of reason and faith dates from the age of Scholasticism, and was very popular among the sceptics of the eighteenth century. Bayle constantly resorts to it; Hume also makes use of it—both, of course, with obvious irony.

[2] S. S. xii. p. 577.

II.

When Lessing was in Hamburg a great and famous scholar, Hermann Samuel Reimarus, Professor of Oriental Languages at a gymnasium there, died. He was the author of several learned and well-known works: among them one on "The Principal Truths of Natural Religion," and another on "Doctrines of Reason." He had never come forward as an open antagonist of revealed religion, being a man of peaceful temper, and not caring to disturb the repose of those who felt no inward need of change. The claims of the Christian faith had, however, been subjected by him to profound and long-continued examination; and he had rejected them as utterly untenable. For many years before his death he occupied himself in the preparation of a work entitled "Apology for Rational Worshippers of God" ("Apologie oder Schutzschrift für die vernünftigen Verehrer Gottes"), setting forth the results of his inquiries; and parts of it he wrote over and over again so as to bring it, in regard both to matter and form, to the utmost possible perfection. At his death he left this work in the hands of his daughter, Elise Reimarus, a woman of great intellectual strength as well as of genial character: not that she might publish it, but that copies of it might be handed from one to another as she might judge that it would be of service.

After the death of Reimarus, Lessing became very intimate with his family. With Elise Reimarus especially he formed a friendship which stood the shock even of his marriage, and which, as we shall see, grew in depth and tenderness when Lessing was once more left to fight his battles alone. He received—probably from her—a copy of her father's work, and took it with him to Wolfenbüttel. He was profoundly impressed by it. Strictly logical, the author advanced from one position to another without fear of consequences, desirous only of arriving at pure truth; and he supported himself by learning probably more vast and

thorough than that of any other German of the day. With many of its conclusions Lessing did not agree; and all the deepest tendencies of his nature prevented him from sympathising with the spirit of hostility to Christianity by which it was animated. But he believed that if it could be brought before the world it would mark an era in the history of theological thought. The believers in Christianity would be compelled to look once more, and more carefully than ever, to their defences; and, above all, the modern theologians would be confronted by an enemy with whom they would have to come to a definite and precise understanding.

He lent the treatise to Mendelssohn when the latter visited him in 1770; and during his visit to Berlin in the following year he entered into negotiations with a publisher for the purpose of getting it printed. The publisher was willing, if the sanction of the censor could be obtained; but even in the Berlin of Frederick the Great that official hesitated. He would offer no objection to the publication, but neither would he grant formal permission. The publisher did not think that this afforded him sufficient guarantee, and drew back. Lessing, therefore, returned to Wolfenbüttel with the MS.

As librarian he enjoyed complete freedom from the Brunswick censorship, so far as the publication of works found in the library was concerned. This privilege had been specially granted to him; and it occurred to him that at least portions of the work might be printed in his "Contributions to Literature and History," under the plea that they belonged to the library. In 1774 he began cautiously with the insertion of a chapter on "The Toleration of Deists," heading it "Fragment of an Anonymous Writer" ("Fragment eines Ungenannten"). He accompanied it with a few observations, in which he attempted to baffle curiosity as to the authorship by affecting complete ignorance, but suggesting the name of a certain Lorenz Schmidt, a scholar of Wolfenbüttel, long dead, as the possible writer:

a suggestion he afterwards withdrew. He also indicated that the treatment of the proselytes of the gate by the ancient Jews, to which Reimarus referred, was by no means the same as the treatment claimed by modern Deists. The proselytes of the gate would not have been allowed to pour contempt on the Jewish faith; but the Deists demanded the right both to oppose Christianity and to hold up it and its adherents to ridicule.

To Lessing's disappointment this Fragment excited little attention; and for about three years he left the rest alone. In 1777, however, when he had overcome his outward difficulties, and was enjoying the quiet of married life, he returned to his original intention, and issued a volume of "Contributions" entirely made up of "Fragments," giving them the general title, "Something more from the Papers of the Anonymous Writer, concerning Revelation" ("Ein Mehreres aus den Papieren des Ungenannten, die Offenbarung betreffend"). There were five of them; and the subjects were: "Of the crying down of reason in the pulpit;" "Impossibility of a Revelation which all men can rationally believe;" "The passage of the Israelites through the Red Sea;" "That the Books of the Old Testament were not written to reveal a religion;" "Concerning the history of the Resurrection." No one could complain that these essays were not sufficiently drastic and plain-spoken. The worst that Voltaire had ever said was here equalled, if not surpassed; only, while the force of Voltaire's objections lay in the incisive wit with which they were urged, that of the German scholar lay in the thoroughness of his inquiries and his obvious moral earnestness.[1]

In the first of these four Fragments Reimarus insists that the orthodox are utterly inconsistent, inasmuch as the reason which they decry is the instrument by which alone

[1] It is well said by Schwarz that Reimarus did for the philosophy of Wolf very much what Strauss did for that of Hegel in regard to Christianity.

they are able to prove the religion they proclaim. The second is devoted to showing that the historical evidence in favour of a Revelation loses weight with each new generation; that the various races of the world differ so much, and are so attached to their own religions, that no one faith can be adapted to all alike; that, as a matter of fact, a comparatively small number of men have ever heard of Christianity; and that it is, therefore, impossible to suppose it was ever divinely ordained for all. The third Fragment brings together the obvious objections to the truth of the Biblical narrative respecting the subject it deals with; and in the fourth the writer attempts to prove that the doctrine of the immortality of the soul is not contained in the Old Testament, and that, therefore, the volume lacks the most essential condition of a Revelation. Reimarus strikes in the fifth Fragment still more fearlessly at received opinions. He drags to light the contradictions of the Evangelists on the subject of the resurrection of Christ, and unhesitatingly concludes not only that there was no resurrection, but that the disciples deliberately carried away the body, and afterwards imposed upon the world by an invented tale.

As in the case of the Fragment on the toleration of Deists, Lessing accompanied each of these with observations of his own; and it is important to observe their general character, as the whole of his later controversy was suggested and determined by them. While dealing with the particular objections of Reimarus, he appears to some extent to make common cause with the orthodox. As to the decrying of reason from the pulpit, he points out that this is a fault with which, at the time of his writing, few preachers can be charged. On the contrary—and here he says distinctly what he thinks of the liberal theologians—the prevailing fault is that faith and reason are incessantly proclaimed as one; whereas they are not one, but altogether different. Reason once for all accepts Revelation; having done so, it has no right to require that

the mysteries of religion shall be made intelligible. "For what is a Revelation which reveals nothing? Is it a matter of indifference, if one retains the name, whether one throws away the thing?"[1] In regard to the second Fragment, he admits that there cannot be a Revelation for all men; but why, he asks, should there not be one to give light to the largest possible number in the smallest possible time? And he insists that it is not a doctrine of the Church that those who have never heard of a Revelation, or who have never had an opportunity of rightly understanding it, are on that account doomed. As to the third, he suggests a possible combination of circumstances in which the event might naturally have occurred, but asks what objection there can be to the orthodox simply saying that the whole was a miracle? One may shrug one's shoulders; but the orthodox will not be less consistent for that, and "this consistency, in virtue of which one can foretell how a man in a given case will speak and act, is that which makes the man a man, gives him character and firmness."[2] Lessing allows, in treating of the fourth Fragment, that the Old Testament does not teach the doctrine of the immortality of the soul; and adds, that neither does it set forth the true idea of the unity of God. But it is, he maintains, illogical to conclude that therefore the Old Testament is not to be looked upon as containing a Revelation. Why should a Revelation be supposed to communicate absolute truth? Here he suggests the theory developed in his treatise on "The Education of the Human Race," and appends to his remarks the first half of that work. The theory, to which we shall return, is that the ideas revealed were adapted to the stage of intelligence and culture reached by those to whom they were communicated. The contradictions set forth in the fifth Fragment Lessing does not attempt to reconcile; but again he denies that the author's conclusion is logical. For the contradictions are not those of the actual witnesses, but

[1] S. S. x. p. 18. [2] S. S. x. p. 28.

merely of those who report what the witnesses claimed to have seen; and even if the witnesses themselves had contradicted each other—which they probably did—that would prove nothing, since it is impossible for any one to give at all times precisely the same account of any event he has perceived. The broad fact is, that "the cause which depended upon the credible evidence of these witnesses is won. Christianity has triumphed over the heathen and Jewish religions. It is there."[1]

Lessing never meant these remarks to be taken as the full utterance of his own opinions. They were thrown out partly to soften the effect of the downright statements of Reimarus, partly to stimulate the inquiry which it was his purpose to excite. We have not, however, exhausted his observations. One remains; and this he not only intended to be understood as representing his personal conviction, but it is the sole remark to which he attached real importance. It is this: Suppose all the objections urged in the "Fragments" were proved to be well founded, suppose it were necessary to give up the Bible altogether, what then? Would it be necessary also to give up Christianity? By no means. The theologian might be perplexed; the Christian would remain unaffected. "What has the Christian to do with the hypotheses, the explanations, the proofs, of the theologian? To him it is once for all there, the Christianity which he feels to be so true, and in which he feels himself so happy. If the paralytic experiences the beneficent shock of the electric spark, what does it matter to him whether Nollet, or Franklin, or neither of them is right? In short, the letter is not the spirit, and the Bible is not religion. Consequently accusations against the letter, and against the Bible, are not also accusations against the spirit and against religion."[2]

[1] S. S. x. p. 33.

[2] S. S. x. p. 14.

III.

Lessing had no reason to complain of the success of his attempt to awaken the slumbering energies of the Church. Never had she been called upon to meet a more terrible foe than the "Anonymous Writer," who instantly leaped into fame. To find a parallel to the excitement which was stirred we must go back to the time of the Reformation. Within less than two years no fewer than thirty or forty independent writings appeared in reply to the "Fragments" —which would mean hundreds of volumes in our day— and the answers in programmes, periodicals, and newspapers were innumerable.[1]

Of the writers who made up this host, it is necessary here to name only the chief of those whom Lessing answered. One of them was Schumann, director at Hanover, who in a volume in opposition to the "Anonymous Writer" appealed to the evidence of miracles and of fulfilled prophecy. Ress, superintendent at Wolfenbüttel, and therefore a neighbour of Lessing, issued anonymously a reply to the essay on the history of the Resurrection. Of far more importance than either of these was Goeze, head pastor of Hamburg, who at once marched full armed into the battlefield. He was no longer, in any case, so well disposed to Lessing as he had been. The worthy man, having undertaken to write a history of the Saxon editions of the Bible, asked Lessing to do him some trifling favour in connection with this enterprise. For some reason or other, probably because the request was made at the time of his wife's death, the matter escaped Lessing's notice. Goeze felt indignant, and, in afterwards giving the public an account of the painful incident, indicated his belief that Lessing acted so haughtily because of his having been raised to the position of Hofrath. To do him justice, however, he would have entered into the struggle even if his pride had not been thus wounded, for he was the type of

[1] Schwarz, Lessing als Theologe, p. 125.

a zealous pastor, earnest in warding off danger from his flock, and there was nothing of which he stood in greater dread than heresy. To him a heretical opinion meant not merely an error of judgment, but an error of judgment which must determine the eternal destiny of those who hold it. During the whole of his public life, therefore, he had been distinguished for the fire and energy with which he had opposed perilous doctrine. Even the youthful Goethe he had felt it his duty publicly to denounce. "Werther," he proclaimed, was an apology for suicide; and terrible consequences might be expected to result. "By-and-by," he wrote, "it will not be considered a crime to make away with those who block up our path." This state of things was being rapidly brought about by liberal theologians. What, he asked, would become of Christendom if their pernicious principles prevailed? "A Sodom and Gomorrha!"

In the present case he was more fervid even than usual, for he knew that he had no common foe to bring down. Unlike the majority of those who flung themselves into the controversy, he paid little attention to the "Anonymous Writer," and directed his arguments against Lessing. With a true instinct he detected in the latter by far the more dangerous enemy of the two. He began his assaults in a series of letters to a Hamburg newspaper, adopting the plan of flattering Lessing as a poet and critic, but depreciating his theological knowledge and deploring his "direct and indirect attacks" against Christianity. These letters he afterwards printed along with various additional articles, entitling the whole, "Something preliminary against Herr Hofrath Lessing's direct and indirect hostile attacks on our most sacred religion." Later on he published three tracts on "Lessing's Weaknesses." His tone became more violent and uproarious as he advanced. At first he was guilty of nothing worse than begging Lessing to tremble in anticipation of his dying hour; afterwards he endeavoured to stir up the Consistories and the Aulic Council

against one who was undermining not only the Church but the State. Hitherto he had never come off second best in controversy: he was so unscrupulous that his opponents usually took good care not to provoke him beyond a certain point. He had at last, however, aroused an enemy who, although absolutely scrupulous, had also been invariably victorious: and before the struggle was ended he had good reason to regret that he had not tempered his valour with a little needful caution.

CHAPTER XXV.

THEOLOGICAL CONTROVERSY.

I.

THE boldest spirit might have felt some alarm at the tempest which Lessing had called down upon himself. He had not to learn for the first time that of all opponents theologians are apt to be the most bitter, the most reckless, the most ready to adopt any means by which the mouths of their enemies may be closed; and now he had caused this very class to fill the air with cries of rage and horror. Of him, however, as of few men, it may be truly said that "he never feared the face of man." We have often had occasion to see how willing he was to accept a challenge; and how, if no challenge came, he would sometimes voluntarily plunge into controversy. Every fresh attack upon him and upon his "anonymous writer" kindled anew his love of battle, and he resolved that of all the more important controversialists ranged against him not one should have reason to say that his arguments were slurred over or neglected.

He began with an answer to Schumann, consisting of a paper on "The Demonstration of the Spirit and of Power" ("Ueber den Beweis des Geistes und der Kraft"), and a dialogue entitled "The Testament of John" ("Das Testament Johannis"). Both are of great importance in estimating the drift of Lessing's teaching, and will be alluded to farther on. They were written while his wife was still alive. After her death, instead of laying aside his weapons,

he grasped them the more firmly; for in the excitement of the struggle he took refuge from the misery that had suddenly overwhelmed him. His next work was "A Rejoinder" ("Eine Duplik"), in reply to his neighbour, Ress. In substance this contains no more than had been already advanced in his remarks on the Fragment dealing with the story of the Resurrection; but the argument is fully expounded, and with extraordinary vigour both of thought and style. He begins tolerably calmly, but as he advances passion glows through his words, and he pursues his unfortunate opponent—a rather weak, commonplace man—with bitter satire. At the conclusion he refers to this change of tone, and asks, "What ought I to do? Excuse myself? With the silly mien of an unpractised hypocrite beg forgiveness? Promise that I shall on another occasion be more upon my guard? Can I do that? Yes, yes, I promise—never again to undertake beforehand to remain cold and indifferent in connection with certain things. If a man may not be warm and interested in regard to that which he clearly sees to be a maltreatment of reason and Scripture, when and where may he be so?"[1] This time, however, Lessing was undoubtedly too severe, for Ress had had recourse to no unfair stratagems, and mere intellectual feebleness does not deserve to be treated with scathing ridicule. The truth seems to be, that while the "Duplik" was being written Lessing was receiving the printed letters of Goeze, each of which was more outrageous than the last, and that poor Ress had to suffer for the wrath stirred by the more energetic Hamburg pastor.

It was for him that Lessing reserved his whole strength. Goeze was in no way worse than scores of other Lutheran pastors of the time; but he differed from the majority of those who sympathised with him in being able to give vehement expression to his opinions and feelings. Lessing, therefore, gladly selected him as the type of the narrow-

[1] Sämmtliche Schriften, x. p. 117.

minded theologians who would force all mankind into a single mould; who abhor every departure from their particular solution of the problem of life; who are not persecutors only because they have no longer the power of giving effect to their will. Modern controversial literature, if we except Pascal's "Letters," has produced nothing finer than the writings in answer to Goeze. In them Lessing's style is at its best. He does not write as a theologian, but as a man of culture who has a right to approach theological questions with absolute freedom; he takes them from the schools into the world of active life, and speaks of them as he would of any other subject in which men are genuinely interested. We are never allowed altogether to lose sight of Goeze. He is the foil that brings out in their true splendour some of the best spiritual qualities: a passionate love of truth, scorn of intolerance, noble charity. Poor Goeze! Had he contented himself with his many triumphs over timid enemies, he might have passed like his neighbours into a not dishonourable obscurity; he aimed higher, and achieved an immortality he never sought.

It is in the writings against Goeze that Lessing gives full play to his love of metaphor. For every thought he has a living image; the most abstract ideas are put in so concrete a shape that they touch both fancy and reason, and awaken a multitude of suggestions connected with the real world. And we are never detained too long before a single aspect of truth. Quickly, in the midst of an exposition, he often passes to unforeseen positions; the light flashes every instant in broken colours from a new angle of the diamond. The prevailing tone in regard to Goeze is that of a comic poet dealing with a thoroughly congenial theme; but the comedy is a mask behind which the most shallow cannot fail to detect deeply serious thought.

The first reply to the pastor was in the form of a letter containing a now famous "Parable" ("Eine Parabel"), and a demand that he should withdraw his assertion that Lessing

had said it was impossible to meet the objections of the "Fragments." Before this was issued Lessing received several letters by Goeze, in which he was denounced in unmeasured terms. He, therefore, added a few vigorous words, warning his opponent that if many more such letters were published, the discussion might possibly become a very grave one. "Write," he concludes,[1] "write, Herr Pastor, and make others write, to your heart's content; I also shall write. If in the smallest thing that concerns me or my anonymous author I admit that you are right where you are not so, then I can no longer guide a pen."

This was followed by "Axioms; if there are such in matters of this kind" ("Axiomata, wenn es deren in dergleichen Dingen giebt"): a short treatise, but giving in a concentrated form the substance of the whole controversy. Next came eleven papers, one after the other, headed "Anti-Goeze"—the most lively and popular of the series—and the fight was closed by two tracts, in which Lessing answered a question put to him by Goeze as to what it was he understood by the Christian religion.[2]

Besides these controversial writings Lessing began a number of others; and he was prepared, if necessary, for years of labour. But his schemes were cut short by death.

II.

The opponents of the "Fragments" were not content with merely arguing against and denouncing them; they furiously attacked Lessing for having given them to the world. Whether he agreed with the author or not, they urged, he was doing his utmost to undermine the faith of the people, and therefore he was to be regarded as a public enemy. If doubts were to be published at all, they ought to be reserved for the learned by being written in Latin.

[1] S. S. x. p. 128.

[2] A faithful rendering of the writings in reply to Goeze will be found in "Cambridge Free Thoughts, and Letters on Bibliolatry," translated from the German of G. E. Lessing, by H. H. Bernard, Ph.D. London: Trübner & Co. (1862).

No position could be more opposed than this to Lessing's deepest impulses. He had dwelt all his life in an atmosphere of doubt, receiving no dogma simply because it was upheld by authority, rigidly testing every opinion in every department of thought by reason and experience. And his belief was that truth loses its efficacy in the life of men so long as it is held mechanically. To be really influential it must often be examined afresh, looked at from new points of view, applied to new problems, brought into contact with new facts and theories. He went even farther. "Not the truth," he exclaimed in a well-known passage of the "Duplik,"[1] "of which a man is or believes himself to be possessed, but the sincere effort he has made to come behind the truth, makes the worth of the man. For not through the possession but through the investigation of truth does he develop those energies in which alone consists his ever-growing perfection. Possession makes the mind stagnant, indolent, proud. If God held enclosed in His right hand all truth, and in His left simply the ever-moving impulse towards truth, although with the condition that I should eternally err, and said to me, 'Choose!' I should humbly bow before His left hand, and say, 'Father, give! Pure truth is for Thee alone!'"

The mildest argument by which he justifies himself is that a sharp distinction must be drawn between the purely literary and the practical aspects of books.[2] The botanist wanders over hill and dale in search of new plants, and when he discovers one, it is a matter of indifference to him whether it is poisonous or not. The shepherd, however, is justly careful to keep his sheep away from the neighbourhood of poisonous plants. To the shepherd Pastor Goeze corresponds; to the botanist, Lessing the librarian, part of whose duty is to put the learned world in possession of every literary treasure which falls in his way. He does not, of course, admit that the "Fragments" are really "poisonous." His argument is that, even granting that

[1] S. S. x. p. 53. [2] S. S. x. p. 121.

they are so, he can as little be condemned for bringing them within reach of the curious as Pastor Goeze for warning his flock of their dangerous character.

Still more decisive is the consideration that the thoughts expressed in the "Fragments" were already occupying many minds.[1] Surely, then, it was better that they should be openly expressed, and that scholars and thinkers should have the opportunity of indicating wherein they erred. Goeze allowed that "objective" religion gained by discussion; but "subjective" religion was imperilled by every word written against it. "So?" says Lessing.[2] "By Heaven! a profound distinction, which I beg him to leave in his school terminology, if he does not wish it to be hissed and to be used for an exactly opposite purpose. For if it is true that religion objectively gains by every attack made upon it, and only subjectively loses, must we decide according to the greater gain or the greater loss whether such attacks are to be tolerated or not? Yes, if gain and loss were here perfectly homogeneous things, and it were only necessary to subtract the smaller from the greater in order to decide by the remainder! But the gain is essential, the loss only accidental. The gain stretches through all ages; the loss limits itself to the moment in which the objections remain unanswered. The gain is to the advantage of all good men who love enlightenment and conviction; the loss affects only a few who do not deserve to be considered either because of their understanding or because of their morals. The loss affects only the *paleas levis fidei:* only the light Christian chaff which at every wind of doubt allows itself to be separated from the grain and flies off."

Least of all was it allowable that Protestants should set up an arbitrary barrier against investigation, since without the right of free inquiry there could have been no Reformation.[3] The very essence of Protestantism is that each shall decide for himself whether or not propositions offered

[1] S. S. x. p. 160. [2] S. S. x. p. 175. [3] S. S. x. p. 161.

to him as true are really so. "Herr Pastor! if you could bring it about that our Lutheran pastors should become our popes; that they should have power to prescribe to us where we must cease to investigate Scripture, to put limits to our investigations and to our right of publishing the result: I should be the first who should exchange the popelings for the Pope. It is to be hoped that many think equally decidedly, although they do not speak with the same decision. And now, Herr Pastor, work on to scare as many Protestants as possible back into the bosom of the Catholic Church. Such a Lutheran fanatic is much approved of by the Catholics. Your politics are worthy of your theology." As to the proposal that arguments against the Bible should be written in Latin,[1] that would be very good for the schoolmasters, for then they would be able to hold out a strong inducement to study. But what of the countries where, as in Poland and Hungary, the common man understands Latin pretty well? Must freethinkers there be compelled to limit themselves to Greek? Besides, many very ignorant persons know Latin, while some of the best thinkers have not had an opportunity of learning it. And a book written in Latin really appeals to a wider circle than one in a modern tongue, since in England and France, for instance, there are Latin scholars who cannot read German. "A soul is a soul to the devil; or if he makes a distinction among souls, he would be a gainer by this plan. For the soul of a German Hodge, who could be seduced only by German writings, he would win the soul of an educated Frenchman or Englishman. Instead of a dry roast he would gain a larded one." The scheme is essentially unjust, for its object is to confine to a few enlightenment to which all who desire it have an equal claim. True, a few weak people may be offended by open speech. "I would not," says Lessing,[2] "intentionally tread upon a worm, but if it is to be accounted a sin if I accidentally tread on one, I do not know what to

[1] S. S. x. p. 179.

[2] S. S. x. p. 181.

do except to give up moving altogether; to bring none of my limbs out of the position in which they once happen to be placed; to cease to live. Every movement in the physical world develops and destroys, brings life and death; brings death to one creature, life to another: would it, therefore, be better to have no death and no movement? or rather to have death and movement?"

After all, Lessing maintains, it is less the supposed evil done by controversy than their own comfort that bigots have in view when they sternly forbid the questioning of received opinions. "O ye fools! who would gladly banish the hurricane from nature, because here it buries one ship in the sands and there dashes another against a rocky coast. O ye hypocrites! for we know you. It is not about these unfortunate ships you care, otherwise you would have insured them; your thoughts are confined to your own little garden, your own little conveniences and pleasures. The wicked hurricane! Here it has unroofed a summer-house of yours, there rudely shaken loaded trees, there overturned your precious orangery in seven earthen pots. What do you care how much good the hurricane otherwise effects in nature? Could it not do it without injuring your little garden? Why does it not blow past your hedge? or at least have its cheeks less full when it approaches your landmarks?"[1]

It is essential to observe that Lessing does not defend the opinions of Reimarus. On the contrary, he intimates over and over again that in many important respects he wholly differs from them. All he does is to assert the right of the human intellect to examine with perfect freedom the subjects on which Reimarus had arrived at unpopular conclusions. That in regard to all subjects, the highest not excluded, criticism must have unrestricted play: that is the position for which Lessing contends. He will have the Bible, not less than art or the drama, the subject of full and unbiassed discussion.

[1] S. S. x. p. 126.

One of the arguments by which he supports this vital principle is that the Bible contains a great deal which does not in any way affect religion. Goeze did not like this suspicious-looking proposition. It meant, he asserted, that the Bible does not contain an exposition of religion. "Dear Herr Pastor," Lessing retorts,[1] "if you have set to work in this way with all your opponents! Are, then, 'to be' and 'to contain' the same things? Are, then, the propositions identical—the Bible *contains* religion—the Bible *is* religion? In Hamburg they will certainly not dispute that there is a great difference between *gross* and *nett*. There, where so many articles have their fixed *tare*, could they not allow me a small tare upon the Holy Scripture, upon so precious an article? . . . How if there is not a little in the Bible that serves neither for the illustration nor the confirmation of the least important principle of religion? What other good Lutheran theologians have maintained of whole books of the Bible, may I not maintain of single notices in this or that book? At any rate, one must be a rabbi or a manufacturer of sermons to find out any way of bringing into relation with religion the Yaimim of Anah, the Cherethites and the Pelethites of David, the cloak which Paul forgot at Troas, and a hundred other such things."

If he were quite sure of the use which would be made of his admission, the most orthodox theologian might grant this; but the important question is, at what point do you propose to draw the line between the essential and the unessential elements in the Bible, between that which does and that which does not help to prove the Christian faith? In his "Demonstration of the Spirit and of Power" Lessing draws the line sharply and distinctly, and in a manner that very naturally made his opponents hesitate to concede to him a single inch of ground. He contends that nothing of a purely historical nature can be held to prove Christianity;

[1] S. S. x. p. 132.

and among the things of a purely historical nature he includes miracles.

He grants that if we had seen Christ perform miracles, and were sure they were genuine, that might have justified us in resigning our understandings to his guidance. Even centuries after his time, when miracles were supposed to be still occasionally performed, his wonderful works did not lose their evidential power. But now we live amid a different order of ideas; we never see or hear of natural laws being interfered with. The narratives of Christ's miracles are, therefore, like any other historical narratives; they must be examined and tested. But no historical narrative can ever possess the certainty of demonstrated truth. "We all believe that an Alexander lived who in a short time conquered almost all Asia. But who, on the strength of this belief, would risk anything of great, enduring worth, the loss of which he could not make up for? Who would, in consequence of it, eternally forswear all knowledge that conflicted with it? Certainly I would not. I have at present nothing to urge against Alexander and his victories; but still it might be as possible that they were founded upon a mere poem of Choerilus, who everywhere accompanied him, as that the ten years' siege of Troy is founded upon nothing more than the poems of Homer." [1] Lessing does not enter into the question whether miracles are possible or credible; he takes the narratives as they are, and assumes that they have as high a probability as any historical narratives that could be named. Still they are no more than historical narratives; hence they cannot be made the basis for belief in truths of a higher order than themselves. "If I have nothing historically to urge against the statement that Christ raised a dead man to life, must I therefore consider it true that God has a Son who is of the same nature as He? In what relation does my incapacity to adduce any important argument against the former stand to my obligation to believe some-

[1] S. S. x. p. 39.

thing against which my reason rebels? If I have nothing historically to urge against the statement that this Christ himself rose from the dead, must I, therefore, consider it true that this risen Christ was the Son of God?"[1] The two orders of truths are on totally different planes, and it is impossible logically to pass from the one to the other. If it is urged that Christ, who raised the dead, and himself burst the bonds of the grave, asserted that God has a Son of the same nature as He, and that he is this Son, still it is only historically true that he made any such claim; and no more than historical certainty attaches to the belief that the assertions respecting him proceeded from inspired writers who could not err. "That, that is the foul wide ditch across which I am unable to spring, however often and earnestly I make the attempt. If any one can help me over, let him do it; I entreat him, I conjure him. He will deserve a divine reward from me."[2]

If this argument is accepted, it is clear that Christians need suffer no anxiety when miracles are attacked and shown to be insufficiently supported by the evidence of the Bible. Even if proved, they can prove nothing in their turn. At best we must descend to them from higher truths; we cannot rise to higher truths by their means.

Lessing, however, does not stop at this point. He not only asserts, negatively, that miracles prove nothing, but maintains, positively, that if the evidence of the Bible in their favour is inadequate, Christianity will still continue a living power. Or, as he put it in originally issuing the "Fragments:" "the letter is not the spirit, and the Bible is not religion. Consequently accusations against the letter, and against the Bible, are not also accusations against the spirit and against religion." In a word, the Christian has no reason to dread free investigation; for even if he should be forced to admit that the Bible has not been written by inspired writers, and that many of its assertions contradict each other, he may still remain a Christian.

[1] S. S. x. p. 40. [2] S. S. x. p. 40.

Christianity and the Bible are absolutely independent of each other.

Before passing to this, the most essential of his positions, it may be worth while to quote a passage in which he makes allusion to the qualities of his style. Goeze had complained that instead of expressing himself with the usual solemn gravity, he wrote in an animated way and made constant use of imagery. This is how Lessing replies:[1] "Every man has his own style, as he has his own nose; and it is neither polite nor Christian to laugh at an honest man for his nose, however odd it may be. How can I help not having another style? That I do not elaborate it, I am conscious. I am also conscious that it is accustomed to make the most unusual cascades when I have most deeply considered the subject. It often plays the more wantonly, the more earnestly I have sought to become master of the theme by cold reflection. It matters little how we write, but much how we think. You surely do not maintain that figurative, imaginative words must necessarily have a hesitating, shallow meaning? that no one can think justly and precisely unless he uses the most direct, common, flat expressions? that it injures truth to give by some means to cold, symbolical ideas a little of the warmth and life of natural signs? How ridiculous to ascribe the depth of a wound not to the sharpness but to the brightness of a sword! How ridiculous, therefore, to ascribe the advantage truth gives an opponent over us to a dazzling style! I know no dazzling style which does not more or less derive its brilliance from truth. Truth alone gives real brilliance; and even in raillery and farce it must be present at least as a foil. Therefore of truth, of truth, let us speak, and not of style. I give mine up to the mercy of all the world; and, indeed, I admit that the theatre may have spoiled it a little. I know very well the chief fault which distinguishes it from so many other styles; and everything that attracts too much attention is

[1] S. S. x. p. 167.

a fault. But like Ovid, when the critics wished to cleanse him of all his faults, I feel inclined to ask that this particular one should be spared. For it is not the fault of my style; it is its original sin. It lingers over its metaphors, often spins them out to similes, and sometimes makes one into an allegory; whereby it often gets entangled in remote *tertia comparationis* that might easily be remodelled. My dramatic labours may have helped to intensify this fault. Our anxiety about dialogue accustoms us to keep a sharp look-out for every figurative expression; because it is certain that in conversation in real life, the course of which is seldom determined by reason, almost always by fancy, the transition from one point to another is caused for the most part by the metaphors used by one or another of the talkers. It is this alone, properly imitated, that gives the dialogue flexibility and truth. But how long and exactly must not one contemplate a metaphor before discovering the current which can best carry us forward! And so it would be quite natural if the theatre did not form the best prose writers. I fancy that Cicero himself, if he had been a more perfect master of dialogue, would not have been so wonderful in his continuous writings. Here the direction of the thoughts remains the same; in dialogue it changes every moment. In the former a settled, equal pace is necessary; the latter sometimes requires progress by leaps; and a high jumper is seldom a good, plain dancer. However, Herr Hauptpastor, that is my style, and my style is not my logic. But, you say, my logic is like my style: logic of the theatre. But say what you will; good logic is always the same, let one apply it as one may. Even the mode of applying it is everywhere the same. Any one who displays logic in a comedy would display it also in a sermon; and whoever is without it in a sermon would be unable to write with its help even a tolerable comedy, although he were the most inexhaustible humorist under the sun. Do you suppose that Père Abraham could have made good comedies? Certainly

not; for his sermons are too pitiful. But who doubts that Molière and Shakespeare might have written and delivered excellent sermons if they had mounted the pulpit instead of going on the stage? When you, Herr Hauptpastor, so edifyingly persecuted the good Schlosser on account of his comedies, a double question arose. The one, may a preacher write comedies? To this I answered, why not, *if he can?* The other, may a writer of comedies compose sermons? And to that my answer was, why not, *if he will?*"

III.

The fact that Christianity is independent of the Bible Lessing states with great vividness in the "Parable" contained in his first communication to Goeze. There was once in the capital of a powerful king a vast and splendid palace. It was of very peculiar architecture, with few windows on its outer sides, but provided with many gates and doors of different forms and sizes. There were hot disputes, especially on the part of those who knew little of the interior, as to the scheme of the architect. A number of old plans were in existence, marked by words and cyphers belonging to a language of a past time. From these the critics constructed for themselves ideal palaces, each maintaining that he had penetrated with absolute certainty to the secret. Suddenly at midnight the watchmen raised the cry, "Fire! fire in the palace!" Out rushed the inhabitants of the city; and the disputants carried with them their various plans, each pointing to the place where, judging from his plan, the fire must be. "'See, neighbour, here it burns! Here we may best get at the fire!' 'Or here rather, neighbour! Here!' 'What are you both thinking of? It is here it burns!' 'If it burned there, who would care? It certainly burns here!' 'Put it out here who will, I won't!' 'Nor I here!' 'Nor I here!'" "Through these busy squabblers," concludes the parable, "the palace might really have been

burned down had it been on fire; but the terrified watchmen had mistaken for fire an aurora borealis!"[1]

The palace represents Christianity; the old plans, the Bible and the creeds; the disputants, the theologians. Goeze understood the parable to refer only to the discussion occasioned by the "Fragments." Lessing, who intended to expand it and add notes, wrote in the sketch of a preface that "it was not the worst he had written," and that he wished to represent by it "the whole history of the Christian religion."

There can be no doubt that, when the controversy began, what Lessing meant by Christianity was a religious spirit altogether dissociated from dogma. This is clearly indicated in a passage in which he implies that he has inherited, and is carrying on, the work of Luther: "Oh, that he could decide between us, he whom I should rather have than any other for my judge! Luther! Great, misunderstood man! And by none more misunderstood than by the short-sighted bigots who, with thy slippers in their hands, shrieking but indifferent, loiter along the road beaten down by thee. Thou hast freed us from the yoke of tradition; who will free us from the more intolerable yoke of the letter? Who will at last bring us a Christianity such as thou wouldst *now* teach us, *such as Christ himself would teach?*"[2]

His meaning is still more distinctly set forth in a little fragment, found among his papers, on "The Religion of Christ." "Whether Christ," he here says, "was more than a man is a problem; that he was a real man is certain. Consequently, the religion of Christ and the Christian religion are two quite different things. The religion of Christ is that which he himself as a man recognised and practised, which every man may have in common with him, which every man must wish to have in common with him, in proportion as the character ascribed to Christ as a mere man is sublime and lovely. The Christian religion

[1] S. S. x. p. 121. [2] S. S. x. p. 126.

is that which assumes that he was more than a man, and makes him, as such, an object of worship. How both these religions, the religion of Christ and the Christian religion, can exist in Christ as in one and the same person, is inconceivable. It is scarce possible that the doctrines and principles of the two should be found in one and the same book. At any rate, it is evident that the religion of Christ is set forth by the Evangelists very differently from the Christian religion. The religion of Christ is set forth by them in the plainest and clearest words; the Christian religion, on the other hand, is so uncertain and ambiguous, that there is scarce a single passage with which two men, so long as the world lasts, will associate the same meaning."[1]

The religion of Christ as a man: that is the Christianity which, Lessing believed, lives from age to age, and adapts itself to all the varying conditions of individual and national life. And what he deemed the vital principle of this religion he made plain in the dialogue, "The Testament of John," written in answer to Schumann. It is carried on between two speakers, designated "He" and "I;" and the subject is the legend according to which the Apostle John in his old age confined himself, in addressing the congregation, to the single counsel, "Little children, love one another." After the story has been related by "I," "He" says, "So that is your testament of John?"

"*I.*—Yes.

"*He.*—It is well that you have called it apocryphal.

"*I.*—In contradistinction to John's canonical Gospel. But still I consider it divine.

"*He.*—Perhaps as you would call a pretty girl divine?

"*I.*—I have never called a pretty girl divine, and am not accustomed so to misuse this word. What I here call divine, Jerome calls *dignam Joanne sententiam.*

"*He.*—Ah! Jerome!

"*I.*—Augustine relates that a certain Platonist had said

[1] S. S. xi. (2), p. 233.

the opening words of John's Gospel, 'In the beginning was the Word,' &c., deserved to be inscribed in golden letters on all churches in places that most readily attract the eye.

"*He.*—By all means! The Platonist was very right. O the Platonists! And certainly Plato himself could not have written anything more sublime.

"*I.*—That may be. At the same time I, who do not make much of the sublime writing of a philosopher, believe that what might with far better right be inscribed in golden letters on all churches in places that most readily attract the eye is—the testament of John.

"*He.*—Hm!

"*I.*—'Little children, love one another!'

"*He.*—Yes, yes.

"*I.*—It was by this testament of John that a certain person who was one of the salt of the earth formerly swore. Now he swears by the Gospel of John, and they say he has become since the change a little musty.

"*He.*—Another riddle?

"*I.*—Who has ears to hear, let him hear.

"*He.*—Yes, yes, yes, I perceive very well.

"*I.*—What do you perceive?

"*He.*—Thus certain people always draw their head out of the noose. If Christian love is maintained, they think it does not matter what becomes of the Christian religion.

"*I.*—Do you count me among these 'certain people'?

"*He.*—Whether I should be right in doing so, you must ask yourself.

"*I.*—May I, then, say a word for these 'certain people'?

"*He.*—If you wish to do so.

"*I.*—But perhaps I do not understand you either. *Are not Christian love and the Christian religion the same thing?*"[1]

Lessing by no means stood alone in his time in giving to the practical aspects of religion the highest place. All the freethinkers of the age, from Kant to Basedow, exalted

[1] S. S. x. p. 46.

duty at the expense of dogma; but Lessing alone knew how to give sweetness and allurement to the moral ideal. It was not mere accordance with a code of laws he required, but the purifying and quickening spirit that transforms obedience into freedom, that makes the law to which we submit the embodiment of our wish and hope. The love which he sought to make the principle of life was no narrow feeling confined to a sect or church; it was love for man as man; love which displays itself both in lofty aspiration for the race, and in kindliness, patience, and simplicity in the daily intercourse of the world.

Interpreted in this sense, religion is not confined to Christian lands. It assumes among Christians a special form; but under many guises it lives in essence in every mind that aspires to a true and harmonious life. Lessing firmly believed this, and might have appealed to it in support of his general position. As, however, he was addressing men who identified religion with Christianity, the ground he took up was that Christianity existed before the Bible, and cannot, therefore, be regarded as dependent upon it. Goeze could not deny that it was originally proclaimed solely by the spoken word, and that whilst it was thus spread abroad there was no real need for the written word; but he insisted that if it had not been preserved in the New Testament, it must ultimately have vanished from the world. "Everything which happens in the world," replied Lessing,[1] "leaves traces of itself in the world, although men cannot always immediately detect them; and Thy teaching alone, Divine Friend of man, which Thou didst not command to be written but to be preached, would it, had it only been preached, have possessed no power to reveal its origin? Was it necessary that Thy words, in order to become words of life, should first be transformed into dead letters? Are books the only means of enlightening and improving men? Is oral tradition nothing? And if oral tradition is subject to a thousand intentional

[1] S. S. x. p. 142.

or unintentional falsifications, are not books so likewise? Might not God by the same exercise of His immediate power with which He is supposed to have guarded the books have guarded the oral tradition? Alas, Almighty God! for the man who wishes to be a preacher of Thy word, and yet so boldly asserts that in order to attain Thy ends Thou hadst but the one way of which it has pleased Thee to inform him! Alas for the theologian who, except this single way which he sees, flatly denies all other ways, because he does not see them! Merciful God, let not me be so orthodox, that I may not be so presumptuous!"

Goeze argued that "from the ninth century till the beginning of the fifteenth there was an interval in which the writings of the Evangelists and apostles were almost lost. Who knew the Bible except a few scholars? Until the invention of printing, it remained buried in the cloisters in manuscripts and translations." "How stood the Christian religion during this period," he continued, "in regard to the masses? Was it more than a disguised heathenism?" As regards the first part of this argument, Lessing simply points out that the head pastor is in error in his facts. "Why does he say there were fewer copies of the New Testament from the ninth to the fifteenth century than from the fifth to the ninth? Exactly the reverse; in the course of time the codices of the New Testament multiplied. They were most rare in the first and second centuries; so rare that many a large church possessed only a single codex, which the presbyters held under lock and key, and which, without their special permission, no one was allowed to read. Will he try to prove that of the period to which he refers? For my part I believe that there were more copies of the Bible during this period in Germany alone than during the first two centuries in the whole world: the text of the Old Testament being perhaps excepted." If, therefore, religion became corrupt, it was not because there were fewer Bibles. Besides, the increase of the number of copies through printing only partially

revived and purified it. "Has the Romish Church since that time given up a single one of its old doctrines? Are there not Middletons who still consider it no better than a disguised heathenism? I have no doubt that the Herr Pastor himself is of this edifying opinion. But there was the Reformation? Do we, then, owe this to the unchecked and more frequent use of the Bible? Even that is not beyond question. For the Reformation was effected less because men began to use their Bibles than because they ceased to use tradition. Moreover, we owe to the unchecked and more frequent use of the Bible Socinianism as well as the Reformation."[1]

In the course of the discussion it occurred to Goeze, who saw clearly enough where lay the chief burden of the argument, to demand of Lessing what he meant by the Christian religion, whose independence of the Bible he so strongly maintained. One could almost wish that Lessing had plainly uttered his whole mind. He did not, however, deem the moment appropriate. In order to grapple at the closest quarters with the enemy, he boldly accepted Goeze's own definition of Christianity. "I understand by the Christian religion," he answered, "all those doctrines of faith which are contained in the creeds of the first four centuries of the Christian Church." That there might be no pretext for accusing him of holding anything back, he added that he included the so-called Apostles' Creed and the so-called Athanasian Creed.

After the publication of this reply, in his "Necessary Answer to a very Unnecessary Question" ("Nöthige Antwort auf eine sehr unnöthige Frage"), he wrote to Elise Reimarus: "I am glad that you so well understand the tactics of my last sheet. I will make evolutions before him which he certainly does not expect. For, as he has made the mistake of wishing to know not what I *believe* in the Christian religion, but what I *understand* by the Christian religion, I have won; and one half of the Christians must necessarily protect

[1] S. S. x. p. 148.

me in my bulwark against the other half. So Paul divided the Sanhedrim; and I, I have only to try to prevent—what in any case would not happen—the Papists from becoming Lutherans, and the Lutherans from becoming Papists."[1]

It must be confessed that this is a somewhat hard passage for Lessing's admirers; but the disingenuousness is only in appearance. Although he did not personally believe "all those doctrines of faith which are contained in the creeds of the first four centuries of the Christian Church," he did believe that they may be conscientiously held altogether apart from the evidence contained in the Bible: nay, even if that evidence were pronounced worthless. It is still the experience of the primitive Church to which he appeals. In the "Necessary Answer" he starts with the assumption that the substance of the creeds of the first four centuries constituted what was known as the *regula fidei*. Now, this *regula fidei* was not taken from the New Testament; it existed before a single book of the New Testament was written. It, therefore, is the rock upon which the Church was built: not the Scripture, not Peter and his successors. The books of the New Testament, as contained in our present canon, were unknown to the early Christians; and the individual books were not held in the esteem in which Protestants hold them. It was considered a crime to believe the written word of an apostle rather than the living word of a bishop. The writings of the apostles were judged by the *regula fidei;* and only because of their accordance with this were they accepted. The truth of Christianity was never proved from these writings. They were not even regarded as an authentic commentary on the *regula fidei* in its whole extent; hence heretics were not allowed to cite the Scripture. And the Fathers in writing of Christianity proved its facts and truths by reference to tradition, quoting the books of the New Testament only for the sake of additional support and illustration.

[1] S. S. xii. p. 612.

Astonished—and with good reason—to find himself thus confronted, Goeze replied that it was absurd to ask him whether the Christian religion in this sense could be maintained without Scripture. That the Bible was the sole ground of Christian doctrine, that without the Bible Christianity could not have been spread abroad, and could neither be proved to be true nor continue to exist, was a principle "held by all reasonable Christians, by all teachers of the Christian Church without distinction of the different parties into which it is divided, even the Socinians not excepted." Moreover, to prove that all Lessing had said about the position of the Bible in the early Church was untrue, he quoted a well-known passage, in which he supposed Irenæus to speak of the Scriptures as the "foundation and pillar of our faith" (*fundamentum et columnam fidei nostræ*). In reply, Lessing wrote a second "Necessary Answer," pointing out that it is not true to say that all Christians give the Bible the same place as Goeze, since the Catholic Church appeals not only to it but to tradition; and that if the Bible is taken as the sole ground of faith, it is impossible to disprove Socinianism. As to the passage from Irenæus, Lessing makes short work of Goeze's learning, proving that what the Father had spoken of as the foundation and pillar of our faith was "the gospel," not the Scriptures, and that the former meant not the four Gospels but the substance of Christian doctrine.

In the first of his "Necessary Answers," Lessing had openly stated that his conclusions were derived from repeated and careful reading of the Fathers of the first four centuries, and that he was, therefore, prepared to meet all opponents on this ground. After the unfortunate venture in regard to Irenæus, Goeze thought it would be safer to make no farther display of scholarship, and retired from the field. He had never before been known to allow to an enemy the last word.

Another theologian, Walch, took up the question at the point at which Goeze left it. In an elaborate work entitled

"Critical Examination of the use of the Holy Scriptures among the ancient Christians in the first four centuries," he piled up quotations from the Fathers to prove that the early Church regarded the Bible in precisely the same light as did the Reformers and their followers. Lessing began a careful answer to this work; and had he lived to finish it, it would evidently have been one of the most masterly of his learned writings. His broad statement that the Church looked for four centuries to the *regula fidei* as its supreme guide, he so far limits as to make it applicable only down to the time of the Nicene Council, when a new era began. Within the period thus fixed he has no difficulty in meeting Walch, who was a scholar of a very antiquated type, quoting authorities without the smallest attempt at critical discrimination and exactness. Lessing shows that he had confounded the *regula fidei* with the *regula disciplinæ*, the latter having undoubtedly been profoundly affected by the apostolic writings; and that he had cited passages referring to the Old Testament as if they were also applicable to the New. The merest glance at this fragment suffices to indicate that Lessing felt as much at home in patristic as in classical literature. Every minute statement of his antagonist he passes through the ordeal of keen examination; and occasionally he raises the discussion to a level at which it is possible only for thorough and experienced students to follow him. Take, for instance, this:—"Any one who dares maintain that Irenæus made Scripture independent of tradition; that he was of opinion that it was of no importance, when the writings of the apostles were available, what the apostles had taught by word of mouth; that he did not regard the message of the apostles, expressed and preserved in the *regula fidei*, as the true ground of our faith, as the indispensable key to the writings of the apostles: any one, I say, who dares maintain this, has never read Irenæus as a whole; he can scarce have been at the trouble to take in by a rapid glance even the economy of his five books 'Contra

Hæreses.' For what is his course in these books? After he has brought to light the tasteless, scandalous doctrines of the Gnostics, and opposed them in a preliminary way by means of truths of reason, and by showing their own inconsistencies, is it not his first object to dispose of them *manifestato præconio ecclesiæ?* And what is this *præconium ecclesiæ* except the *regula fidei*, or, as Irenæus would rather say, the *regula veritatis*, the *κανὼν τῆς ἀληθείας*, which he puts before all arguments taken from Scripture, and in accordance with which alone he feels assured he must judge whether a passage of Scripture for or against the heretics may be allowed to pass. His course invariably is *traditio* first, and then *ostensio ex scripturis*. Would it not be well to look just a little to the spirit of the whole book from which one takes passages, and test the latter by the former, so as to make sure that they can say what they seem to say?"[1]

He writes in the same confident tone respecting Ignatius, Clement of Alexandria, and Tertullian; by the latter of whom, he says, he was first led to understand the relations of the Christian faith to the Bible in primitive times. Thorough familiarity with these writers could not have been acquired had he read them merely in connection with a passing discussion. It arose from deep and long-continued study, begun for the purpose of satisfying his own mind as to the claims of Christianity to a supernatural origin.

Does, then, Lessing mean that although we need not accept orthodox Christianity on the ground of Scripture, we are compelled to accept it on the ground of tradition? If this were really his meaning, we should have little reason to be grateful to him for his labours; for it would be a poor kind of progress which consisted in passing first from the yoke of tradition to the yoke of the Bible, and then back again from the Bible to tradition. Lessing, the free, the audacious thinker, always logical, always striving

[1] S. S. xi. (2), p. 200.

to see things as they are, no matter how they may have been represented by others, was incapable of so retrogressive and weak a step; and those who, like Frederick Schlegel, suppose that his words are to be thus interpreted, prove that they have altogether missed both the essential qualities of his character and the real aim of his theological discussions. His object was to convince men that they could have no reason to dread free inquiry; and it was merely to persuade even orthodox Protestants to grant the utmost liberty to criticism that he insisted that their religious beliefs do not necessarily stand or fall with the Bible. 'You assert,' he practically said to them, 'that if the Bible is taken from us, everything is taken from us. But what, then, of the fact that for more than three centuries Christianity was believed altogether apart from the evidence of Scripture? These proofs which you think so important were never advanced during the whole of that period. At best Scripture only intensified the belief which, without it, governed the whole life of the faithful. Well, why may not the same state of things exist again? Has Christianity lost its power over the understanding, feelings, and imagination? Can it not be accepted without the aid of texts, simply because of its own inherent strength and charm? And if it can, why should you be distressed and alarmed by the reasonings of the most fearless investigators?'

The arguments by which Lessing believed that theologians may make most way without the smallest reference to the Scripture are the simple facts that Christianity exists as a great moral energy; that those who live under its influence find in it a source of peace and goodness. "Even if one is not in a position," he says, "to answer all the objections which reason so busily makes against the Bible, yet religion (Christianity) remains unmoved and undisturbed in the hearts of those Christians who have attained an inward feeling of its essential truth."[1] Again: "I say that he whose heart is more Christian than his head is in

[1] S. S. x. p. 124.

no way affected by those objections, because he feels what others content themselves with thinking. He is the bold conqueror who leaves the fortresses alone and takes possession of the country. The theologian is the timid soldier who breaks his head against the frontier fortresses, and therefore scarce even sees the country." [1]

Behind all his later reasonings, however, was his earlier position: that true religion, of which love is the vital germ, is altogether dissociated from dogma, and is in no way dependent upon evidence taken from the Bible or any other book. This was the truth which sank deep into the popular mind, and prepared the way for those subsequent discussions on the essence of religion with which is associated every important name in modern German philosophy. It is in no sense opposed to reverence for the Bible. As we shall see, Lessing fully recognised the immense services of the Scripture to mankind; and he appreciated too keenly the splendid qualities of its greatest books to suppose that it can ever cease to be a living power in the world. He only affirmed that religion can exist without it; that it is but one of many influences fitted to nourish and strengthen sentiments which lie deeply imbedded in the spiritual nature of man.

How did the canon originate? What was the conception of Christianity in the primitive Church? In what relation did that conception stand to tradition on the one hand and to the books of Scripture on the other? It was one of the great results of the controversy that it first clearly suggested these questions as problems for historical science. They have never ceased since his time to occupy the attention of Biblical scholars.

IV.

In 1778, the year in which all Lessing's theological controversial writings, except his reply to Schumann, were published, he began to write out carefully a work on

[1] S. S. x. p. 145.

which he had been engaged for many years, but which he never completed. It was called "New Hypothesis concerning the Evangelists regarded as merely human writers." The fragment we now possess consists only of about twenty pages, yet it is not too much to say that it was the most valuable contribution made to Biblical literature in the eighteenth century. Lessing himself understood its worth. "I do not think," he wrote to his brother in February, 1778, "that I have written anything of this kind that is more thorough or ingenious. I myself am often astonished to see how naturally everything proceeds from an observation which I found I had made, without rightly knowing how I came by it."[1]

The work starts with the proposition that the first followers of Christ were Jews, and continued, in imitation of his example, to live as Jews. By other Jews they were called Nazarenes; and this name, given them in contempt, they willingly accepted as an honour. It is incredible that they should have continued long without some written collection of the sayings and doings of the Master. Such a work would naturally be put together soon after his disappearance from the earth; and it would be added to from time to time by the possessors of copies, in accordance with the statements of those who knew him, or who had heard from others of his career. By-and-by, when the period in which Christ still lived in the memory of his followers was at an end, this collection would be looked upon as complete. Then it would naturally be known by different names: as the Gospel of the Apostles, since its contents were chiefly derived from their recollections; as the Gospel of the Nazarenes, since it belonged to them; as the Gospel of the Hebrews, since the Christians of Palestine were called Hebrews as well as Nazarenes. Lastly, it would be known by the name of any writer who gave it an improved form, or who translated it into a more intelligible language. So far all is hypothesis; but the hypo-

[1] S. S. xii. p. 603.

thesis is not without evidence, for in the fourth century the Nazarenes actually did possess such a collection of narratives as that supposed—in Syro-Chaldaic—and it is spoken of by the early Fathers with the highest respect as the Gospel of the Hebrews, the Gospel of the Apostles, the Gospel of Matthew. Jerome thought so well of it as to translate it into two different languages. "If this Gospel of the Nazarenes was not a later false abortion, it was earlier than all our four Gospels, of which the first was written at least thirty years after the death of Christ."[1]

When Christianity became an influence among the heathen, it was necessary that parts of this original Gospel should be translated into Greek. The first rendering of it was made by Matthew, who naturally did not exactly reproduce it, but selected only those portions which seemed to him quite certain and suited to the wants of those for whom he wrote. Thus is explained the tradition that Matthew wrote his Gospel in Hebrew. The original from which he derived his materials was in a Hebrew dialect; and men very readily confounded his work with his authority.

But as Matthew did not exhaust the treasures of the Gospel of the Nazarenes, other writers prepared in Greek many more versions of it. Of these, the chief were the Gospels of Mark and Luke. The former was not, as usually supposed, a mere epitomiser of Matthew. He seems to be so merely because he used the same original, although he probably possessed a less perfect copy. Luke differed from Matthew in presenting the narrative in a fresh order and a somewhat better style. And John? Lessing no more doubts that the fourth Gospel was written by John than he questions that the other Gospels sprang from the writers whose names they bear. And he is of opinion that, like the rest, John made use of the original Hebrew Gospel; but this Evangelist, he thinks, evidently wrote his work not merely to extend the information given

[1] S. S. xi. (2), p. 127.

by his three predecessors, but to present a wholly different view of Christ. They reveal him in no other light than as a prophet of the highest order, endowed with supernatural gifts; and in Matthew especially there are various traces of purely Jewish influence. If no other conception had been formed, the Church would have ultimately perished as a mere Hebrew sect. John came forward and developed a higher idea of Christ. "His Gospel alone gave the Christian religion its true consistency; we have to thank his Gospel alone if the Christian religion still continues in this consistency notwithstanding all attacks, and will, we may suppose, continue as long as there are men who believe they need a Mediator between them and the Divinity: that is, for ever." [1]

Already in primitive times it was recognised that in the Gospels of Matthew and John the Church possessed a Gospel of the flesh and a Gospel of the spirit. The Gospels of Mark and Luke were selected from all others, and preserved, "because they fill up in many respects the gulf which lies between Matthew and John; and because the writer of the one was a disciple of Peter, and the writer of the other a disciple of Paul." Hence the order in which they are arranged. We pass by gradual stages from the least spiritual to the most spiritual idea of Christ.

The importance of this hypothesis partly consists in the fact that it undermined in the most effective possible manner the ordinary theory of inspiration. Lessing, indeed, expressly says that it is not inconsistent with inspiration; and there is a sense in which this is true. But if the Evangelists were not strictly original writers, but used a work for which no claim of inspiration is made, it is clear that the guidance they received from above was not of a kind that need in any way deter investigators from the coolest and most thorough criticism.

But still more important was the influence of the work in its relation to the actual progress of historical research.

[1] S. S. xi. (2), p. 139.

Those who do not accept the supernatural element in Christianity are not bound to provide a natural explanation. We may be unable to say how a great movement originated, and yet be reasonably convinced that it did not originate in miracle. At the same time, the rise of so vast and complicated a phenomenon as the Christian Church presents to science a problem of extraordinary fascination; and during the greater part of the eighteenth century thinkers had no real clue to the settlement of the question. They could only suggest that there was a large amount of roguery and silliness among the early Christians: a strange origin for the greatest spiritual movement which ever bore mankind onwards to a higher life. Lessing, without solving the problem, indicated in his "New Hypothesis" the track which has been pursued by later criticism. Here for the first time attention was decisively called to the deep distinction between the fourth Gospel and the first three Gospels. The presence of a Petrine and Pauline element in the early Church was indicated; and the fact was brought out that, with the supposed exception of John, we do not have in the Evangelists actual eye-witnesses of the events recorded. A very considerable interval was also shown to have intervened between the life of Christ and the only records of it which we now possess. We owe, in a great degree, to the development of these pregnant hints whatever approach has been made to an explanation of the growth of the power which for centuries moulded the highest convictions, aspirations, and hopes of the Western world.

CHAPTER XXVI.

"NATHAN THE WISE."

I.

WHEN Lessing was in the midst of his theological controversies he published a new "Fragment," on "The Aims of Jesus and his Disciples." This was by far the boldest of the series. The author altogether denied that Jesus had intended to establish a spiritual kingdom. He merely gave himself out as the Messiah in accordance with the ordinary ideas of his countrymen; and so long as he lived, the twelve apostles had no higher object than to share his earthly glory by occupying the twelve thrones of Israel. After his death they deliberately invented a new scheme, and gave out that their Master had risen from the grave, and would by-and-by return and judge the world. Thus their work received a more spiritual aspect, than he or they had originally intended, and they changed the record of facts to suit their "new system." The two "systems," the old and the new, may both be detected in the Gospels; but naturally the new is the more prominent, the old revealing itself in spite of the efforts of the writers to suppress it.

Not even the "Fragment" on the resurrection of Christ created so violent a disturbance as this. The anonymous author was regarded as a monster of iniquity; and many orthodox Christians thought that the man who issued such fearful blasphemy was hardly less guilty. Goeze and his friends redoubled their efforts to secure the punishment of Lessing by the civil authorities; they insisted that the State was in obvious danger, since doctrines of so frightful a nature

must lead to the dissolution of all lawful ties. They did not succeed in bringing about a prosecution. By an odd stroke of fortune the unlucky Goeze, in the midst of his raging at Lessing's wickedness, was himself prosecuted for insulting the Roman Catholics in his sermons. Lessing was in no way afraid of the intervention of the Aulic Council, for, as he wrote to his brother, repeating what he said about the same time to Elise Reimarus, he had always the means of dividing the Sanhedrim. That is, while the Protestants opposed him, he would have it in his power to win over the Catholics by pointing out that, although endeavouring to lower the place of the Bible in the Church, he was exalting the claim of tradition. The outcry against him, however, was not altogether fruitless. The Brunswick Government issued a command, in June, 1778, to the establishment which had published the "Fragments," that it was to print for him no fresh work which did not bear the signature of a Minister. The ground of this order was, that he had violated the condition on which he had received freedom from the censorship: namely, not to publish anything injurious to religion. At the same time the last "Fragment," which had appeared as a separate book, and the "Contributions" containing the earlier "Fragments," were confiscated.

Lessing wrote to the Ministry that he had understood the condition to mean that he was not to publish any writing of his own injurious to religion. And this he had not done. He hoped, therefore, he would be allowed to continue his "Anti-Goeze" papers, as he was the person attacked, and the worst he had said of his opponent was complimentary compared with what his opponent had said of him. Besides, "the whole quarrel had no influence on the Christian religion." Unfortunately, the Duke, who died in 1780, was at this time very ill; and the Hereditary Prince, who, although personally orthodox and disliking controversy, would not have approved of violent measures, was from home. The Ministers could, therefore, do very

much what they liked; and as they were under the influence of the clergy, the response Lessing received was a rescript formally depriving him of his freedom from the censorship, requiring him to deliver up the MS. of "The Fragments," and forbidding him to publish anything without permission, either within or without the State of Brunswick. He took all these measures, except the last, very calmly. The confiscation of the "Contributions" highly delighted him, for he knew that the public would at once become curious as to works about which so much was said: a result that actually happened, not only in the Duchy of Brunswick, but also in Saxony, where the clergy were strong enough to secure that his theological writings should be forbidden to be sold under heavy penalties. The order, however, that he was to publish nothing, either in Brunswick or elsewhere, without permission, he resolved wholly to disregard. He was even prepared, if it was insisted upon, to resign his position, and start once more in the world. A few days before the rescript reached him he had sent to Berlin his "Necessary Answer to a very Unnecessary Question," that it might be printed there. When it appeared, he was taken to task by the Ministry; but he paid no attention, and soon afterwards printed at Hamburg the second "Necessary Answer." This time he was left alone; and as Goeze, much to Lessing's astonishment, stopped writing against him, there was no immediate occasion for issuing any more pamphlets. He had begun a twelfth "Anti-Goeze," and had it been necessary to finish it, no power on earth would have been strong enough to prevent him from sending it forth to the world.

Meanwhile, Lessing had formed a plan which was to remove him for a time from the bitterness of controversy. On August 11, 1778, he wrote to his brother:[1] "I do not yet know what will be the issue of my business; but I should like to be prepared for whatever may happen. You know well that a man cannot be so better than by having as

[1] Sämmtliche Schriften, xii. p. 613.

much money as he needs; and last night a foolish thought occurred to me. Many years ago I sketched a play, the subject of which has a sort of analogy with my present controversies, which, of course, I at that time never dreamed of. If you and Moses [Mendelssohn] approve, I shall have the thing published by subscription, and you may—the sooner the better—get two hundred copies of the enclosed announcement printed, and distribute them as much as you think necessary. I should not like the subject of my play to be too soon known; yet, if you or Moses wish to know it, look up in the Decamerone of Boccaccio: Giornata I., Nov. 3, Melchisedech Giudeo. I think I have devised a very interesting episode for it, so that the whole will be very readable, and I shall certainly play the theologians a more vexatious game with it than with ten Fragments."

The play of which he thus wrote was "Nathan the Wise" ("Nathan der Weise"). At what period he originally designed it, is not known;[1] but the conception was in his mind at least three years before he worked it out. "My 'Nathan,'" he wrote in a subsequent letter to his brother, "as Professor Schmid and Eschenburg can testify, is a piece which I wished to complete and publish three years ago, immediately after my return from my travels. I have sought it out again now, merely because it occurred to me that after some small changes in the plan, I might fall upon the enemy with it on another side, on the flank."[2]

He thus announced his intention to Elise Reimarus: "I must try whether they will still let me preach undisturbed at least from my old pulpit, the stage."

[1] In an essay on "Lessing and Swift," J. Caro develops the curious theory that "Nathan" was suggested to Lessing by Swift's love story, and that, therefore, we must suppose the first plan to have been formed about 1756. One of the arguments in favour of the theory—which is directly opposed to Lessing's own words—is, that the name Templar resembles that of Swift's patron, Sir William Temple! By this method of criticism one might prove anything by any reasoning. For admirable analyses and criticisms of the play, see "Lessing's Nathan der Weise, ein Vortrag," by David F. Strauss; "Lessing's Nathan der Weise, Idee und Charactere der Dichtung," by Kuno Fischer; "Lessing's Nathan der Weise, erläutert," by H. Düntzer.

[2] S. S. xii. p. 620.

At first his friends misunderstood him. They imagined he was about to hold up his opponents to ridicule in a comedy written in the spirit of the more amusing passages of his "Anti-Goeze." "Even you, dear brother," he wrote to Karl Lessing, "have formed an altogether untrue idea of the play. It will be anything but a satirical piece, to enable me to quit the arena with contemptuous laughter. It will be as pathetic a piece as I have ever written, and Herr Moses is quite right in thinking that ridicule and laughter would not suit the tone which I have adopted in my last paper [the "Necessary Answer"], in case I should not give up the whole controversy. I have no desire to do this, and he will soon see that I do not in the least injure my cause by this dramatic leap."[1] Again: "My piece has nothing to do with our present black-coats; and I will not barricade its way to the stage, although it may not come there for a century. The theologians of all revealed religions will, indeed, inwardly chafe at it; but they will take care to express no public disapproval of it."[2]

It was his custom before writing a play to prepare a careful sketch of it. This he did for "Nathan the Wise" in the middle of November, 1778, beginning to write it in verse immediately afterwards. In March of the following year the work was complete, and about two months afterwards it was in the hands of the subscribers. It was the first play Lessing had completed in verse. He would probably have preferred prose; but, as he wrote to Ramler, verse was better suited to the Oriental tone which the subject sometimes demanded. His brother expressed some fear that his progress would thus be retarded. He replied, however: "My prose has always cost me more time than verses. Yes, you will say, than such verses! With permission: if they were much better I should think them much worse." The measure was the blank verse which English poets have made so splendid a vehicle of thought

[1] S. S. xii. p. 617. [2] S. S. xii. p. 620.

and passion. Klopstock and various other German writers had used it before; but Lessing was the first, notwithstanding occasional laxity, to give it strength, freedom, and elasticity. After him it was adopted as a matter of course in the plays of Goethe and Schiller.

II.

The scene of the play is laid in Jerusalem at the time of an armistice during the Fourth Crusade. Saladin is in possession of the Holy City, and Richard Cœur de Lion and Philip Augustus of France are represented as both present in Palestine. There are certain anachronisms in the play which prevent us from fixing a precise time for the action; but Lessing does not pretend to be strictly historical. All that can be said is that since Saladin conquered Jerusalem in 1187 and died in 1193, the incidents must be supposed to have happened between these two dates.

The interest of the play centres in Nathan. He is a Jew, retaining the usual manner and appearance of men of his race, and remaining true to the ordinary observances of his religion. The Jewish element does not, however, go below the surface of his nature; he is, before all, a man, and has cultivated the greatest and noblest human qualities. He has suffered deeply from the fanaticism of the Christians. Eighteen years before the action opens his wife and seven sons were cruelly murdered; but even this did not dry up within him the sources of tenderness and goodness. His charity rises above every obstacle; he makes allowances for the conditions which determine the beliefs and prejudices of his fellows, and sees beneath all the wrong and shame of the world the essential goodness that preserves society from decay.

Three days after the murder of his wife and sons was perpetrated, when he was enduring the agonies of a man from whom all that makes life valuable has been swept

away, a messenger came to him with an infant, the daughter of a dear friend to whom he had repeatedly owed his life. This friend was Wolf von Filneck, a knight who was then fighting against the Saracens. His wife, having given birth to a daughter, had just died: and as he was obliged to defend with other knights the fortress of Gaza, he sent the child to Nathan, begging him in the meantime to care for it. Wolf von Filneck was slain; and then Nathan kept the infant, to whom he gave the name of Recha, bringing her up as his own daughter. He found for her a Christian nurse, Daja, the widow of a German crusader, but instilled into the child the principles of no positive religion, satisfying himself with training her in habits of reverence, obedience, and truth. All the love of his great and generous spirit he lavished upon her, finding in her a power and charm that kept his interest in life fresh and pure, and deepened his natural goodness. She is loyal, affectionate, and ardent, often carried away by the enthusiasm of the moment, and ready sometimes to obey the promptings rather of the imagination than of the reason. Of her true origin she knows nothing. She regards Nathan as her father, and loves him with almost passionate fervour. To her he is the living embodiment of all her highest ideals; in his presence whatever is best in her nature blooms and flourishes; communion with him gives her a sense of perfect security and calm.

When the action begins Nathan has just returned from a long journey, laden with many treasures of merchandise. He is met by Daja, who tells him that his house has been burned. This he has heard, but the intelligence has not greatly excited him. He is, however, deeply moved when she adds that Recha had only just escaped from the fire. For a moment he fears that his daughter is dead, and that the intelligence is being broken to him; but Daja reassures him, and by a masterly stroke we are at once shown what place he holds in Recha's life. "This morning," says Daja, "she long lay with closed eyes as if dead. Suddenly she

started up and called, 'Hark, hark! There come the camels of my father! Hark! his soft voice itself!' Her eyes closed again, and her head, the arm on which it had rested having been withdrawn, fell back upon the pillow. I rushed to the door, and behold! there you were really coming, really coming! What a miracle! Her whole soul was with you—and with him."

The allusion in the last words is to a young Templar, who had happened to pass while the fire was raging, and, hearing Recha's screams, had dashed into the house, and at the risk of his own life saved her. He had quickly gone away, not speaking a word, and declining to receive thanks. Occasionally he had afterwards been seen walking backwards and forwards under the palm-trees; but he had for some time disappeared, and no one knew where he was. His name, as we subsequently learn, was Curd von Stauffen. He had been captured, and was about to be executed with various other prisoners, when Saladin was struck with his extraordinary likeness to a long-lost brother, and spared his life. Recha was convinced that it was no mere man who in the moment of her agony had come to her help. It was her guardian angel; and the white cloak of the Templar became transformed in her eyes into an angel's wings.

When Recha comes, after the first greetings, which receive a touch of pathos from the terrible peril she has been delivered from, she refers to the supposed angel to whom she owes her life; and Nathan seriously reasons with her upon the foolishness of looking for miracles, as if the natural course of life were not itself sufficiently strange and mysterious. A European comes to Jerusalem; a turn of the eyebrow, a mole, a "nothing" suggests to Saladin a resemblance to his brother; the European is saved—and Recha escapes a horrible death. "That would not be a miracle, miracle-loving people? Why trouble yourself, then, about an angel?" Besides, an angel does not touch our sympathies; he would be cold to our gratitude. "But a man!" To dissipate her illusion in another way, Nathan

excites her fears by suggesting that the Templar is dead or ill, perhaps suffering misery in utter solitude. This succeeds; and as he sees she is convinced, he takes the opportunity to remind her how much more easy it is to cherish such pious fancies than to act well.

By-and-by we are introduced to the Templar, whose return Daja hastily announces to Nathan. He is, as she had described, walking backwards and forwards under the palms; and as he does so a Lay Brother meekly approaches him. The character of the latter is carefully outlined. He is of a tender and sympathetic nature, with a genuine admiration for noble manliness; but his personal will he absolutely sacrifices to the will of his superiors, fulfilling his vow of obedience with unquestioning and mechanical fidelity. The Templar is somewhat rough and passionate, but with good impulses, and loathing every kind of dishonour and meanness. The Lay Brother brings him a message from the Patriarch of Jerusalem, delivered after skilful preparation, to the effect that as Saladin often goes with a small retinue to Lebanon, where his father has concealed vast treasures, it would be very easy to surprise and capture him. It is suggested to the Templar that he should carry this intelligence to the French King, if not himself deliver Christendom from its most powerful foe. The Templar recalls his obligations to Saladin, and, to the satisfaction of the good Lay Brother, declines the mission proposed to him. He is no sooner alone than Daja approaches him, and, as she has repeatedly done before, tries to induce him to come and see Recha, who longs to express her gratitude. She informs him that Nathan has arrived, and wishes to add his thanks to those of his daughter. The Templar, although so free in his religious opinions that he is only nominally a Christian, shares to the utmost the popular aversion from the Jews, and angrily tells Daja to trouble him no more about a matter which has never excited in his mind the smallest interest.

All this passes in the first act, in the course of which

we also make the acquaintance of a Dervish, Al Hafi, who has recently become treasurer of Saladin's household. He is not an enthusiastic Mussulman, and longs to leave Palestine and visit the sacred waters of the Ganges. He has a sincere affection for Nathan, whose unaffected greatness of soul wins the love of the most diverse characters.

In the second act the curtain rises upon a scene in the palace of the Sultan. Saladin and his sister Sittah are engaged at a game of chess. The former has all the energy, the reckless generosity, the power of imposing his will upon others, which belong to the Saladin of history; but, in addition to these qualities, he is endowed with an open mind, an impartial love of truth. So little importance does he attach to the differences arising from religion, that he expresses regret to Sittah that she cannot become the wife of Richard's brother, and that his own brother cannot marry Richard's sister. "Ha! what a house! Of the first, the best houses in the world, the best! You see I do not scruple to praise myself: I think myself worthy of my friends." Sittah, who, although less noble than her brother, has his clear, decisive judgment, and is altogether free from prejudice, replies: "Did I not immediately laugh at the beautiful dream? You do not know the Christians, you will not know them. Their pride is, to be Christians, not men. For even the humanity which, since the time of their founder, they oppose to superstition, they uphold not because it is human, but because Christ taught it, because Christ practised it. Well for them that he was so good a man! Well for them that they can take his virtue upon trust! Yet what virtue? Not his virtue; they wish to spread abroad only his name, to disgrace, to scorn the names of all good men. About names, about names alone are they concerned."

To this passionate outburst Saladin calmly replies that it was the Templars who had shattered his scheme; and they did it not as Christians but as warriors. The terms

on which he had proposed an alliance with his family were unpalatable to them; and they had consequently affected to be very strict on the score of religion. "That the knight may suffer no disadvantage they play the monk, the silly monk."

Saladin, who is in no humour for play, has affected to lose the game, and when the Dervish Al Hafi enters, directs him to pay to Sittah the thousand dinarii she has won. Al Hafi, who is honest and somewhat brusque, reveals, in spite of her frequent interruptions, not only that he is unable to pay her, but that similar winnings have long been unpaid, and that she has quietly maintained his court from her private purse. "A robe, a sword, a horse, and—a God!"—these are all Saladin's personal wants; but until supplies he expects from Egypt arrive he must somehow obtain money for his public necessities. He accordingly suggests that Al Hafi should borrow from some one else than Sittah: only, not from any one whom he has made rich, as that would seem like taking back what he had freely given. Sittah mentions Nathan, of whom she has often heard, and whose return has been announced to her. Al Hafi, alarmed for his friend, tries to throw difficulties in the way; but Sittah knows well both the wealth and the character of the Jew, and stirs her brother's curiosity respecting him.

Meanwhile, Nathan has approached the Templar as he takes his usual walk under the palm-trees. The Templar at first coldly repulses him; but the sweetness and gentleness of Nathan's words at last have their effect, and the two men become warm friends. "Despise my people as much as you will," says Nathan, "neither of us chose his people. Are we our people? What *is* a people? Are Christians and Jews Christians and Jews before they are men?" As they talk, Daja comes in breathless speed and announces to her master that the Sultan has summoned him to the palace. When he is about to obey the call, he is met by Al Hafi, who tells him how anxiously he has sought to

save him from this calamity. The enthusiastic Dervish proclaims that he is to start forthwith for his beloved Ganges, and proposes that Nathan should go with him, as he may be quite sure that under some pretext he will be quickly deprived of his wealth. The firm mind of the sage is in no way shaken by this prospect; and all he says, as Al Hafi disappears, is, "Wild, good, noble—what shall I call him? The true mendicant is alone the true king!"

It is at this point Lessing makes use of the story in Boccaccio by which the idea of the play was originally suggested to him. That story is as follows:—Saladin, having exhausted his treasury, was at a loss to know how he could replenish it, when he called to mind a rich Jew of Alexandria, named Melchizedeck. This Jew was very covetous, and Saladin saw that it would be impossible to obtain money from him except by force. He, therefore, devised a plan by which he might use force without apparent injustice. Summoning the Jew to his presence, he received him graciously, made him sit down, and thus addressed him: "Honest man, I hear from divers persons that thou art very wise and knowing in religious matters; wherefore I would gladly know from thee which religion thou judgest to be the true one, viz., the Jewish, the Mohammedan, or the Christian?" The Jew saw the trap that was laid for him, and after a little reflection, being a truly wise man, thus answered: "The question which your Highness has proposed is very curious; and, that I may give you my sentiments, I must beg leave to tell a short story. I remember often to have heard of a great and rich man, who, among his most rare and precious jewels, had a ring of exceeding beauty and value; and being proud of possessing a thing of such worth, and desirous that it should continue for ever in his family, he declared, by will, that to whichsoever of his sons he should give the ring, him he designed for his heir, and that he should be respected as head of the family. That son to whom the ring was given made the same law with respect to his descendants, and

the ring passed from one to another in a long succession, till it came to a person who had three sons, all virtuous and dutiful to their father, and all equally beloved by him. And the young men, knowing what depended on the ring, and ambitious of superiority, began to entreat their father, who was now growing old, every one for himself, that he would give the ring to him. The good man, equally fond of all, was at a loss which to prefer; and as he had promised all, and being willing to satisfy all, privately got an artist to make two others, which were so like the first that he himself scarce knew the true one; and at his death gave one privately to each of his sons. They afterwards all claimed the honour and estate, each disputing with his brothers, and producing his ring; and the rings were found so much alike, that the true one could not be distinguished. To law, then, they went which should succeed, nor is that yet decided. And thus it has happened, my lord, with regard to the three laws given by God the Father, concerning which you proposed your question: every one believes he is the true heir of God, has His law, and obeys His commandments; but which is in the right is uncertain in like manner as of the rings."

Saladin perceived that the Jew had escaped the net which was spread for him; he, therefore, resolved to discover his necessity, to see if the Jew would lend him money, mentioning at the same time what he had designed to do had not the discreet answer prevented him. The Jew freely supplied him with what he wanted. Saladin afterwards paid him with a great deal of honour, made him large presents, besides maintaining him nobly at his court, and was his friend as long as he lived.[1]

Not only is the character of the Jew altogether changed in "Nathan," but it would have been impossible for Saladin, as Lessing conceives him, to form so mean a scheme. It proceeds, therefore, from Sittah, who puts it in a manner that would not shock the sentiments of her time. If

[1] The "Decameron" (Chatto & Windus), p. 55.

Nathan, she argues, is as good as report says, why, then, he will in any case help his sovereign; and Saladin will have the pleasure of hearing how he will answer so curious a question. If he is a covetous Jew of the ordinary type, it will be no great crime to compel him by a skilful device to disgorge some of his wealth. Even when the idea is put in this way, Saladin resents it; but he is at last persuaded, although we feel that it is quite uncertain whether, in the event of Nathan breaking down, he will carry out the trick.

When Nathan is introduced, the better nature of Saladin evidently struggles against the appearance of meanness into which he has been temporarily seduced; and he puts somewhat abruptly the question, "What faith, what law has most enlightened you?" "Sultan," replies Nathan, "I am a Jew." Saladin, apparently forgetting the object for which he has summoned the Jew, and really curious to hear what he will say, answers: "And I am a Mussulman. The Christian is between us. Of these three religions only one can be true. A man like you does not remain standing where the accident of birth has thrown him; or if he remains there, he remains because of insight, reasons, choice of the better. Well, share your insight with me. Let me hear your reasons, into which I myself have not had time to inquire. The choice which these reasons have determined, let me know—of course, in confidence—that I may make it mine."

Nathan is left for a moment alone for reflection; and in an admirable monologue which he utters, a strong light is thrown upon his character. The influence of his Jewish blood is seen in the extreme caution with which he resolves to act. He can scarce believe that a trick is being played upon him; yet this seems only too probable. "The suspicion that he uses truth only as a trap would be too petty!—too petty! But what is too petty for a prince? Certainly, certainly: he entered the house by breaking open the door! If a man approaches as a friend, he knocks

and listens. I must be cautious! But how? how? To appear as a bigoted Jew will not do. To appear as no Jew at all will still less suffice. For he might ask, if no Jew, why not a Mussulman? I have it! That may save me! It is not only children one entertains with stories. He comes. Let him come!"

The story of the three rings is then narrated with striking dramatic force. In several respects, however, it differs from the tale as the Jew in Boccaccio tells it. The true ring, according to Nathan's version, has "the secret power of making pleasing to God and men any one who wears it with belief in its virtue." And, instead of the matter being merely left in doubt, the judge delivers the following decision: "If you do not soon bring your father here, I must send you away from the tribunal. Do you think I am here to solve riddles? Yet stay! I hear that the true ring has the magical power of making the wearer beloved, pleasing to God and men. That must decide; for the false rings cannot do that! Well, whom do two of you love most? Come, say! You are silent? The ring works only inwards, and not outwards? Every one loves himself most? Oh, you are all, then, deceived deceivers! your rings are all three false. The true ring was probably lost. To conceal, to make up for the loss, your father caused three to be made instead of one."

"Splendid, splendid," interrupts Saladin.

"And, therefore," continued the judge, "if you will not take my advice but only my sentence: Go!—My advice, however, is this: take the matter exactly as it stands. If every one of you had his ring from his father, let each believe that his ring is the true one. It is possible that your father could no longer tolerate the tyranny of a single ring in his house! It is certain that he loved you all, and loved you equally; hence he would not oppress two to favour one. Well, let each one imitate his uncorrupted, impartial love! Let each of you strive to make known the power of his ring. Let this power come to your aid with

gentleness, with hearty peacefulness, with well-doing, with the most inward devotion to God. And then, if the powers of the gems reveal themselves with your children's children, I invite you again, thousands and thousands of years hence, before this tribunal. Then a wiser man than I will occupy this tribunal, and speak. Go!"

In the "Decamerone" Saladin is struck merely with the ingenuity, the worldly prudence of the Jew. Here he is penetrated by the truth of Nathan's answer, deeply impressed by the nobleness of character that shines through his words. "Saladin," begins Nathan, "if you feel that you are this wiser promised judge"——"I, dust? I, nothing?—O God!" the Sultan exclaims, as he springs up and seizes the hand of the sage, adding: "Nathan, dear Nathan! the thousands and thousands of years of your judge have not yet passed. His tribunal is not mine. Go! go! but be my friend!"

Instead of the Sultan revealing his necessities, Nathan begs as a favour that his wealth may be used; whereupon Saladin is about to confess with regret his original purpose. Nathan interrupts him, however, and affects to believe that the Sultan had only meant to ask him for the loan of money. To recall the Templar to the memory of Saladin, who had altogether forgotten him, Nathan mentions his name, and tells of the courage with which he had saved Recha. The Sultan is pleased that one who so closely resembles his brother should have acted so worthily, and begs Nathan to bring the young man to the palace that Sittah may also see him.

Meanwhile, the Templar had gone to Nathan's house and seen Recha. Filled with sudden passion, and afraid to trust himself long near her, he had soon rushed from her presence. When he meets Nathan, the latter asks him how Recha has impressed him. He cannot conceal his love, and falls upon Nathan's neck with the cry, "My father!" Nathan, however, has been startled by a resemblance in the Templar to Wolf von Filneck, Recha's

father, as striking as that which induced the Sultan to spare his life. He, therefore, to the Templar's surprise, ultimately to his indignation, receives this unexpected advance coldly.

Daja is in the secret of Recha's birth, and being horrified at the thought of a Christian passing as the daughter of a Jew, often alarms Nathan by threatening to reveal it. Wishing to secure the marriage of her young mistress with the Templar, she goes to the latter and tells him that Recha is of Christian origin and is baptized. He is already angry with Nathan, and now—for the time—looks upon him as a base impostor. Instead of accompanying Nathan to the palace, as he has promised to do, he proceeds to the Patriarch of Jerusalem to ask counsel.

No character in the play has more true life than this narrow-minded and bloodthirsty priest. He delights in the pomp and circumstance of office, and instead of uttering words of kindly charity, he breathes out threatenings and slaughter against the enemies of the faith. The Templar, without suggesting that he is speaking of a reality, puts a case to him like that of Nathan, and asks how he would regard it. The Patriarch is horrified. Bring up a baptized child as if she were a Jew's daughter! Still worse, bring her up in no positive faith whatever! The idea is monstrous. If there is such a Jew, he must be burned. And the pious zealot stamps and rages until he convinces himself that it is no imaginary tale. He will go to Saladin and demand justice. Saladin is bound by treaty to protect the Christians; and at any rate, he declares, "I shall easily persuade him how dangerous it is for the State to believe nothing! All social ties are unloosed, are torn, if men believe nothing!"

This display of Christian ferocity recalls the Templar to himself, and he hastens away. The Patriach, however, sends forth the Lay Brother to make inquiries; and he, having been eighteen years before groom to Wolf von Filneck, remembers to have carried to Nathan an infant of

whom he has never since heard. He goes to Nathan, and one of the most touching scenes in the play follows. Nathan fancies, when the Lay Brother speaks to him, that some one having a better claim is now about to take from him the treasure of his life. With his customary gentle patience, he is prepared to give her up; but the loss will break his heart. The past with all its pathetic memories rises before him; he recalls the fearful days which had followed his awful sorrow. "When you came I had lain three days and nights in dust and ashes before God, and wept. Wept? Expostulated with God, raged, stormed, cursed myself and the world; vowed the most implacable hatred to Christendom. Gradually reason came to me again. It spoke with soft voice: 'And yet God exists! Yet that also was God's decree! Well! come! Exercise what you have long believed: what is certainly not more difficult to exercise than to believe, if you only will. Arise!'—I awoke, and called to God: 'I will! If Thou only willest that I will!' Meanwhile, you dismounted from your horse, and handed me the child wrapped in your mantle. What you then said to me, what I to you, I have forgotten. This only I know: I took the child, carried it to my tent, kissed it, threw myself upon my knees and sobbed, 'God! after seven, now again one!'"

"Nathan, Nathan!" exclaims the Lay Brother, his natural goodness of heart breaking through the crust of conventionalism like a pure spring leaping to the sunshine, "you are a Christian!—By heaven, you are a Christian! There never was a better Christian!"

"What makes me a Christian to you," calmly answers Nathan, "makes you a Jew to me!"

The rest may be quickly told. Nathan is confirmed by the Lay Brother in an impression he has that the family name of Recha's mother was Stauffen: the name of the Templar. The Lay Brother then mentions that he has a devotional book which belonged to Wolf von Filneck, and there is writing in it in the Arabic character. This is

brought to Nathan, who learns from it that Wolf von Filneck was in reality Saladin's brother. In love with a Christian maid, he had gone to Germany, changed his religion, and married her. Afterwards they came back to the Holy Land, he as a crusader for his new faith. They had left behind them in Germany an infant son with the lady's brother, a Templar, who gave the boy his own name and brought him up to follow the career of a Templar. This is the Templar of "Nathan;" so that he is Recha's brother, and Saladin is the uncle of both.

Nathan makes this revelation in the presence of Saladin, Sittah, the Templar, and Recha. The two former welcome with every demonstration of delight the children of their brother; and the Templar, as quietly as he may, accepts the changed relations with one whom he had hoped to call by a still dearer name than that of sister. As for Recha, she clings with all the old love to the man whose gracious and noble image is stamped upon her heart. "You are still my daughter?" asks Nathan tremulously. "My father!" is all the answer she can make; but it is more eloquent than a thousand protestations, for it is the return of a beautiful nature for the tender, sleepless devotion that has watched over her from infancy to womanhood.

III.

If "Nathan the Wise" is judged according to ordinary dramatic laws, it is in many respects seriously defective. Nothing could be colder or less impressive than the transformation of an ardent lover into a brother; and from beginning to end of the work we feel that Lessing is never quite in earnest with the action. It advances slowly, and he stops without hesitation to make his characters deliver long speeches which are in themselves powerful and suggestive, but in no way bring us nearer the goal towards which he seems to be driving. Moreover, in the Patriarch we have a character who does abso-

lutely nothing to develop the plot. It would have been easy to represent him as giving full scope to his fanaticism; and had this been done, highly dramatic situations would have resulted, for Saladin would have sternly opposed his violence, and the Templar would have been overwhelmed with remorse for having in a moment of bitterness exposed his friend to the hatred of so ferocious an enemy. Lessing, however, passes by these obvious advantages, and lets the Patriarch stand as a figure whose sole function is to vituperate and anathematise in vain.

Although designed for the stage, the work must not be judged as a pure drama. It was published as "a dramatic poem," and it is as a dramatic poem written in the service of a particular idea that it must be accepted and enjoyed.

The most cursory reader cannot fail to see that the idea which runs through the whole play and determines its general character is that set forth in the narrative of the three rings. The doctrine Nathan there teaches is often supposed to be, that of the three religions one is true and the two others are false, and that we can conjecture which is the true religion only by observing the results of all three in the lives of their supporters. Such a notion was far from Lessing's mind, and throws no light on the inward significance of the poem.

The true ring, so long as it could be detected, gave to its wearer the right to occupy the throne. At the point at which we become interested in it, it can no longer be detected; it is supposed for the time to have lost its secret virtue of making pleasing to God and men; hence its wearer cannot claim supremacy over his brothers. Now, just as none of the brothers had a ring that gave him a right to dominate the rest, so of the three religions not one can be regarded as the exclusive religion for the world. In so far as Mohammedans, Jews, or Christians pretend that their religion is meant for all mankind, and is rejected by men at their peril, so far all three are false; with such pretensions the best of the three faiths may be denounced as an

imposture. Does it, then, follow that there is no truth in any one of them? By no means. Each of the three brothers received his ring from his father; and to this extent each was genuine. So every historic religion is in a certain sense divine. That is, it is a necessary evolution, under particular conditions of time and place, in the progress of the world. It corresponds to certain needs of those among whom it has originated, and who have preserved it from age to age. In a word, there is no single faith which has absolute authority; but every great religion has a certain relative value.

What, then, is the true position of the upholders of the various religions in regard to each other? Shall each strive to put down the rest, or to convert them? That would be logical if there was one universal religion; but it is utterly illogical if all religions are equally justified by the mere fact that they exist. The true course is for each to let his neighbours live in their own way, convinced that for them that way is as good as his is for him; and, so far as he himself is concerned, to realise in his own mind and conduct the highest spiritual ideals of the religion he happens to have inherited. These ideals are the sole important element in any of the religions. If a man is not patient, sincere, devout, filled with a large and noble charity, it is a matter of utter indifference what he believes: these qualities alone make him a truly religious man. And his religion will not of itself impart them. Character is a flower that comes of a process of thoughtful culture: it is the crown of ceaseless inward effort.

This idea gives us the key to the meaning of the play. Lessing is often supposed to bring upon the stage representatives of the three religions, and he has been bitterly accused of doing injustice to Christianity. How sorry a figure, it has been said, do not the Patriarch and Daja cut beside Nathan and Saladin! This is true; but it is utterly to misunderstand the poem to suppose that there was the remotest intention of unfavourably contrasting

the religion of Europe with the two great Semitic faiths. So far from being a representative Jew, Nathan would have been treated by the synagogues precisely as Spinoza was treated at a later period; and Saladin is quite as far from being a representative Mohammedan. Neither believes in his religion as the absolute religion of humanity; each takes it as the outcome of particular historic conditions, looks upon all other religions with respect, and makes goodness the supreme end of life. To represent such characters was Lessing's sole object in writing the play. He knew how ineffective, how uninspiring is a great moral principle if merely reasoned out, defended, and carried to its last consequences. But let us see it in living action; bring before us men in whom it is the controlling power: then it is no longer a cold abstraction; we instinctively feel its truth and beauty, and open our minds to its influence. "Nathan the Wise" was the result of a clear perception of this fact.

Hence the explanation of the dramatic defects of the play. Had he brought about the triumph of passion he would have withdrawn our attention from his central purpose. That the idea of the poem should lose none of its impressiveness it was necessary that nothing should stand between it and us; that its rays should stream down upon perfectly undisturbed minds. The action might advance slowly; but so much the better if thereby the reader could be aided to a fuller appreciation of the thought everywhere shining out through the deeds and words of the characters. If the Patriarch did nothing to quicken the progress of the tale, he would be not the less serviceable as a foil to Saladin and Nathan. This theory is in full accord with Lessing's own account of the play. "If it is said," he wrote in what he intended to be a preface for a second edition, "that this piece teaches that among all sorts of people there have long been men who have disregarded all revealed religions and have yet been good men; if it is added that my intention has evidently been to represent such men in a less

repulsive light than that in which the Christian mob has usually looked upon them: I should not have much to urge against that view." [1]

In the same preface he defends himself for having sought among Jews and Mohammedans the kind of characters he wished to represent. "Jews and Mussulmans were then the only learned men; the disadvantages which revealed religions bring to the human race can never have been so striking to a reasonable man as at the time of the Crusades; and there are not wanting hints among the historians that such a reasonable man was to be found in a Sultan."

Lessing thoroughly achieves his object, for although the characters are conceived with reference to a definite principle, they are true men and women, and excite a living interest in their destinies. It is usually said that Nathan is simply his friend Mendelssohn idealised; but except that Nathan is a Jew there is nothing to indicate this. Nor is there, as some critics have maintained, any essential resemblance between Lessing himself and his hero. Nathan is a purely ideal figure: represented as a Jew partly because it is a Jew who appears in Boccaccio's story, partly because tolerance and charity are all the more admirable and striking when we see them in a man trained in the narrowest and most exclusive of religions. An inferior artist having such a purpose as Lessing's would have made Nathan declaim continually; but Lessing puts him into a world of human relations, where we find him always the same: pure, upright, with infinite depths of tender love, delighting in self-sacrifice, accepting with steady faith both good and evil fortune. When he gives us a glimpse of the truths on which his spiritual life is based, he does so because the occasion calls for speech, and his words have the light and warmth which come from a conviction wrought through the manifold experience of a long and troubled career. Such a man wins rather than forces his

[1] S. S. xi. (2), p. 163.

way to our affections; and we are prepared to think the best of the principles which, whatever they may be, have helped to temper and shape his character.

Saladin is not placed in so full and strong a light; but he also predisposes us to look with favour upon the theory of the world which, in substance, he holds in common with Nathan. If there is any character in the play who sometimes reminds us of Lessing himself, it is this fiery, energetic, free, generous, and thoughtful sovereign. In his perfect freedom from religious prejudice he is very unlike the real Saladin, who was a faithful Mussulman; but this does not detract from the impression he creates, nor have we any difficulty in believing that at a later time the Saladin of history might have resembled Lessing's creation. The nobleness with which he rises above the petty trick suggested by his sister, his openness to high thoughts, his yearning love for his lost brother, the stern rebukes he administers to the Templar for certain outbursts of rage against Nathan: these things make him live as a type of fine and disciplined humanity.

These two men, standing beyond the range of what is accidental in religion and clinging only to its essence, have thus the power to touch the hearts of their fellows. In the Patriarch we are confronted by one who cares nothing for what is essential in religion and clings only to its accidents; and the result is a bigot in whose eyes the interests of humanity are overshadowed, or rather extinguished, by those of his church and hierarchy. He has a kind word for none save for those who believe with him. For him the loveliness, the poetry of such a relation as that between Nathan and Recha is invisible; he sees only the fact that the latter is baptized, that the former has neglected to teach her a particular creed. It need scarce be said that he is in no sense intended to represent Christianity. He represents only those so-called Christians who are puffed up by the supposed possession of an exclusive privilege; who substitute correctness of belief for

purity of spirit; who, although zealous to spread abroad their opinions, experience no movement of pity at the spectacle of human wrong and woe, and never feel themselves drawn towards an ideal of chastened desire and expanding love. Without this creation Lessing could not have done justice to the fundamental idea of his poem. To understand the power of a moral principle we must see not only men whose lives it sways, but men who are controlled by its opposite. His intolerant rage gives fresh charm to the mildness and charity of the man for whose destruction he thirsts.

The Lay Brother has precisely the same theory of religious doctrine as the Patriarch, but his humility, patience, and admiration for goodness under every form are in striking contrast with the vulgar materialism of his superior. His faith in dogma and submission to authority have not blinded him to the supreme claims of duty. Thus it is easy for him and for Nathan to bridge over the gulf by which they are separated, because in spite of intellectual differences they are one in feeling, they are agreed as to the only vital needs of the individual and of society.

It is probable that Lessing intended to present in the Templar one who had raised himself as far above the narrow view of Christianity as Nathan and Saladin had raised themselves above the narrow view of Mohammedanism and Judaism. But in him the larger faith has not had time to exert to the full its sweet and mellowing influence. He allows himself, in appealing to the Patriarch, to be easily driven by passion; and his blind prejudice against the Jews shows how much of the old pride of faith cleaves to him. But we recognise in him the germ of all goodness, for he prefers the better part; and we know that he too will rise to a clearer and more peaceful spiritual atmosphere.

Lessing meant to make Al Hafi the hero of a separate piece, "The Dervish," to be played after "Nathan." This design he did not fulfil; but even the few strokes by which

the character is sketched, suffice to show that in the case of Al Hafi also religion is the dominant motive. In him it takes a form different from that exhibited by any other of the characters. His faith is of a dreamy type; he longs for the distant East, for a life absolutely devoted to meditation. This, too, is seen to be compatible with sincerity and earnestness.

The three women of the play are all more or less reflections of the principal male figures. In Recha, Nathan's spirit is revealed in a new form. A gentle, refined, loyal nature, she is a proof of the power that passes from a man like Nathan into those who come into living contact with him; in word and act she exhibits the graciousness of a mind dwelling in a world of pure and great ideas. There is true art in the manner in which her relations to the Templar are depicted. Had she felt a genuine passion for him, the shock to the spectator in discovering that she was his sister would have been violent and unpleasant; but there is from the first something remote and ideal in her love. Although she ceases to think of him as an angel, her feelings retain the calm and self-possessed character that would befit love for beings of another sphere; the affection of a sister will perfectly satisfy her. His love is of a more earthly nature; but Lessing does not make much of it. We see them only once together before the final discovery; and in that single interview his words are too reserved to stir a very intense interest. Whatever pleasure, therefore, it is possible to feel at the spectacle of anything so accidental as the recognition of relatives, is as undisturbed as the general nature of the action will permit.

Sittah is a blurred and imperfect copy of Saladin: as free in her religious ideas, and as generous within the limited circle that awakens her sympathies, but without his kindling enthusiasm, his grand impulses. Daja reproduces in common life the spirit that animates the Patriarch amid wider opportunities of making the influence of bigotry

felt. To her, too, all virtue is summed up in a creed; life and religion are divorced from each other. Hence her horror at the supposed crime of Nathan in bringing up a child of Christian origin without the knowledge of Christianity, and her unscrupulousness in revealing a secret she has accidentally learned.

It is useless to raise the question whether art can ever properly be pressed into the service of a special idea. Whatever may be the rule, we are here confronted by the accomplished result, and it is impossible for the most devoted worshippers of art for art's sake not to perceive that the feat is achieved with true power. "Nathan the Wise" is not a poem of splendid genius; its conceptions were built up by the understanding rather than freely created by the combined forces of imagination and passion. Yet it has the fascination which belongs only to work that is destined to survive the buffets and shocks of time. We find in it none of the effects of dim twilight; it contains no trace of vague yearning, and there are but slight allusions to the darker and more mysterious facts of the world. But there is charm also in the clear, bright light of day; and this we find everywhere in "Nathan." The characters, if they do not touch the greatest heights nor descend to the remotest depths of human experience, have true life; and we see mirrored in them many of the fears and hopes, the sorrows and delights, that befall ourselves from day to day. And through all breathes the spirit of a wise and manly philosophy. While the poet's vision floats before us, selfishness is rebuked by his grand humanity, narrowness of sympathy by his unbounded tolerance, indifference by his ardent passion for truth. Although such a work may not rank with the "Antigone," with "Hamlet," or with "Faust," it would be a narrow theory of poetry which would exclude it from a high and enduring place in the literature of the world.

IV.

Lessing had no very sanguine anticipations of the reception his new play would meet with. "It may well be," he wrote to his brother, "that my 'Nathan' would have as a whole but little effect if it were represented on the stage—which it never will be. Enough if it is read with interest, and among a thousand readers teaches even one to doubt the evidence and universality of his religion." A few of his more intimate friends read it with delight, Gleim and Mendelssohn being of opinion that he had never before touched so high a point. But the public were not ready for its elevated teaching, and the theologians considered that its influence could not but be deeply injurious. Thus it did not in Lessing's lifetime reach a second edition, and he never suspected the true importance of the work—"the son," as he called it, "of his approaching age, of which controversy had helped to deliver him."

"I know no place in Germany," he wrote in the preface, from which a quotation has already been made, "where this piece could yet be represented. But health and happiness to the town where the first representation takes place!" It was Berlin that had the honour of gratifying this wish, for there, in 1783, "Nathan" was brought out by Döbbelin. The public professed much admiration the first night: on the third the house was empty. The company was totally unfit to embody conceptions demanding in the players sympathy with high and noble thought. At Weimar, in 1801, a version prepared by Schiller with Goethe's help produced an extremely favourable impression; and ever since that time "Nathan" has been considered one of the gems of the German theatre. No great actor thinks his repertory complete until he has mastered the character of the sage; and audiences still take delight in his purity, largeness of heart, dignity, and wisdom.

In one of his conversations with Eckermann, Goethe expressed regret that Lessing took so much delight in

polemical writing, and that in "Nathan" he had nothing better to do than to express his pique at the parsons. But he had not always this unfavourable opinion. In "Wahrheit und Dichtung" he refers with pleasure to the return of Lessing in "Nathan" to "a more cheerful naïveté, that well became him." And in 1815, referring to a representation of Schiller's version at Weimar, he wrote: "May the well-known tale, happily represented, for ever remind the German public that it is called not only to see but to hear and to understand! At the same time may the divine feeling of tolerance and forbearance therein expressed remain sacred and precious to the nation!"

It is probably to "Nathan" rather than to any other of his works that Lessing owes his European fame. He says in it no more than is expressed in his theological writings, but the magic of form enables it to penetrate where these fall powerless. It has been repeatedly translated into French and English.[1] Dutch and Danish translations have also been published. In 1842 it was acted in modern Greek in Constantinople; and the Turks cordially applauded it, only expressing surprise at the familiarity of the Jew with the Sultan. Thus does Lessing still influence his fellows by the conceptions with which he occupied himself in hours of loneliness and sorrow. His words are words of truth and love, and they strike chords which respond only to the touch of a master.

[1] In 1781 a translation was issued by R. E. Raspe. Ten years later Mr. Taylor of Norwich translated the play, ultimately including it in his "History of German Poetry." This version was made the subject of an article in the "Edinburgh Review" for April, 1806. With the brutality which our grandfathers so often mistook for criticism, the reviewer pronounced the work to be "as genuine sour kraut as ever perfumed a feast in Westphalia." Twenty years afterwards the northern dictator made ample amends for this singular pleasantry by the eloquent article on "The State of German Literature," which is now included in Carlyle's "Miscellanies." "It is to Lessing," says Carlyle in this article, "that an Englishman would turn with readiest affection. We cannot but wonder that more of this man is not known among us." An appreciative essay on Lessing's character and writings appeared in the "Edinburgh Review" for October, 1845.

CHAPTER XXVII.

"THE EDUCATION OF THE HUMAN RACE."

I.

ONE more theological writing remains to be noticed: in some respects the most important of all. It is made up of a hundred brief paragraphs, and fills barely twenty pages; yet it contains the seeds of some of the most fruitful speculations of the present century. The work is the little treatise entitled "The Education of the Human Race" ("Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts").

The first half of it, as already mentioned, was appended to some remarks made by Lessing on the "Fragment" in which Reimarus maintained that "the books of the Old Testament were not written in order to reveal a religion." In 1780 the whole was published as a separate work. Lessing affected to be only the editor; and in recent times the authorship has been claimed for a contemporary of his, Albrecht Thär, who, in a sort of autobiography written for his bride, speaks in mysterious language of "a new system" by him, which "fell into the hands of a great man, who somewhat changed the style and published part of it as a fragment by an unknown author." The biographer of Thär maintained that the work alluded to was "The Education of the Human Race," and for a time the theory that Thär was the author was pretty generally accepted. It is not now worth while to go into the evidence on the subject, as no one any longer supposes that Thär had anything whatever to do with the book. All

Lessing's friends understood it to be by him, and he never denied the authorship, which he certainly would have done had the honour belonged to another. Moreover, the style and mode of thought are unmistakably his, while nothing could be more unlike the style and mode of thought of the writer to whom the treatise has been ascribed.[1]

To understand the reasoning of "The Education of the Human Race," it is necessary to remember the occasion by which the earlier part of it was called forth. Reimarus pointed out that the Old Testament makes no mention of a future life. Hence, he concluded, it cannot be regarded as containing a Revelation. Lessing, as we have seen, did not deny the fact here asserted; he even went a step farther, maintaining that the Old Testament does not truly teach the doctrine of divine unity. Is, then, the conclusion inevitable that there is no Revelation in the Old Testament? No, answered Lessing; for this conclusion assumes that a Revelation must set forth absolute truth: truth applicable to all times and to all circumstances. But what evidence is there for this assumption? May not the world be undergoing a process of education, and may not Revelation be adapted to the particular stage of progress at which it is needed? If so, a thinker may accept the facts brought to light by Reimarus, and still logically maintain the divine character of the Old Testament. It is to the development of this theory that he devotes the first fifty-three paragraphs; he then carries on the argument to the New Testament.

II.

The work starts with the proposition: "What education is to the individual Revelation is to the whole human race." The individual receives from education nothing

[1] To Guhrauer belongs the credit of having first disposed of Thär's claims. Schwarz suggests that the allusion in the autobiography is to the Wolfenbüttel Fragments, and that, being a man of extraordinary vanity, Thär wished to pose before his bride as the author of these works.

he could not attain by his own effort; it only gives him certain advantages more quickly and more easily than he could conquer them for himself. So Revelation imparts to man nothing which could not be discovered by reason; it only puts him in possession of certain truths sooner than he could otherwise reach them. "And as it is not a matter of indifference in education in what order the powers of man are developed, as it cannot bring everything at once to man, so God had to observe in Revelation a certain order, a certain measure."[1] The first man was endowed with the idea of one God; but this idea, since it was communicated, not gained by individual thought, could not long be maintained; hence arose polytheism and idolatry. "And who knows how many millions of years the human understanding would have been tossed about in these errors, although everywhere and at all times individual men recognised that they were errors, if it had not pleased God by a new impulse to give it a new direction?"[2]

He neither could nor would reveal Himself again to a single individual; hence He chose a particular people for a special education, selecting the rudest that He might be able to begin with it at the beginning. This was the Jewish people, of whom we do not know whether they even had a system of worship in Egypt. As they were slaves, this may have been deemed a privilege too high for them. To them God first made Himself known as the God of their fathers; and by the miracles with which He brought them out of Egypt He convinced them that He was more powerful than any other god. By accustoming them to the idea that He was the most powerful god, He gradually prepared them for the doctrine of the divine unity. But this doctrine was far beyond their reach, and thus they often fell away from their own God and sought for the most powerful deity among the gods of other nations. A people so uncultivated, so incapable of abstract thought: how was

[1] Sämmtliche Schriften, x. p. 308. [2] S. S. x. p. 308.

it possible to give them a moral training except by the methods which are adopted in regard to children—namely, by means of rewards and punishments experienced in this life? Had God referred them to a future life, he would have committed "the mistake of a vain pedagogue who will rather hasten on his child and boast of him than thoroughly instruct him."[1] At this point Lessing alludes to the theory of Warburton, that to make up for the absence of the doctrine of immortality, God, by a perpetual miracle, rewarded and punished each individual Hebrew in exact accordance with his deserts. A Revelation, argues Lessing, may very well pass by certain truths as unsuited to the capacity of those to whom it is addressed; but it will not make the attainment of these truths more difficult than it naturally is. Now, such a system as that suggested by Warburton would have made it impossible for the Jews to rise to the conception of immortality; for although the inequalities in the lot of men do not afford the best argument for a future life, yet without them no one would ever have believed in a world beyond the grave. The good man, dying satiated with life, would not have wished continued consciousness; the wicked man would have been too glad to think that there were no more penalties in store for him. The punishments and rewards must, therefore, have been for the people rather than for the individual man; but they were confined to the present sphere, and considering the character of those with whom He had to deal, God could not have given them a larger reference.

Meanwhile, some races remained far behind the chosen people; others, by the guidance of reason alone, advanced far ahead of them. "This happens also among children who are allowed to grow up without training; many remain quite rude; some educate themselves to an astonishing degree."[2] Now, the time came for the education of the Jews to be promoted by their being brought into contact

[1] S. S. x. p. 310. [2] S. S. x. p. 311.

with a people who had obtained purer ideas of spiritual truth than they. Carried into captivity, they were astonished to perceive the superiority of Persian conceptions. "The child sent abroad saw other children who had larger knowledge and lived a more dignified life, and asked in shame, 'Why do not I also know that? why do not I also live so?'"[1] He looks into his elementary books; and "behold, he recognises that the fault does not lie with the books, that he has himself to blame for not long ago having had the same knowledge, lived the same life." The Jews learned from the Persians to believe not merely in the most powerful of gods, but in God; their Jehovah became the one Deity, and it was impossible that they should ever afterwards fall away from Him. The doctrine of immortality they also heard of; but here they had not the same help in their sacred writings. It was in no sense indicated there, yet there were slight hints of it, as when God spoke of Himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

As regards style, the Old Testament has all the qualities of a book for a people in an early stage of culture. It teaches abstract truths in the form of allegories: as in the stories of the creation, the origin of evil, and the confusion of tongues. Its style, sometimes plain and simple, sometimes poetic, also adapted it for its purpose. Of especial service were its tautologies, in which the writers sometimes seem to say different things and yet say only one thing, or seem to say one thing and yet present really quite different truths.

Thus the Old Testament was in every way fitted to be an elementary book; but such a book is suited only for a certain age. The child who outgrows it receives injury from continuing to use it, for it stops the progress of his thought; he is compelled to read into it meanings which exist only in his own mind. He thus becomes superstitious, fond of mystery, full of horror at clear and intelligible thought.

[1] S. S. x. p. 315.

So it was with the Jews, as we may see in their Rabbinical writings. "It was necessary that a better teacher should come and snatch from the child's hand the exhausted elementary book. Christ came."[1]

The child, having passed into youth, could be appealed to by means of higher motives than earthly punishments and rewards: he had become capable of directing his actions in accordance with the claims of a future life. Therefore, the doctrine of immortality was the great doctrine taught by Christ. He was its first authoritative teacher, for he supported his words by miracles, and in him ancient prophecies were fulfilled; he was also its first practical teacher, for although others before him had believed in or hoped for a future life, the thought of it was supposed to influence only outward action. Christ, however, proclaimed that we must prepare for the next world by inward purity. Apparently he intended this doctrine only for the Jews, but his disciples proclaimed it to the Gentiles also, and thus made themselves the benefactors of the species. It is true they associated it with other doctrines which are less enlightening and have a less elevating influence; but we ought to examine whether the human understanding did not receive from these doctrines a new impulse. It is certain that the New Testament, in which they are presented, has served and still serves as the second and better elementary book for the race. More than all other books it has occupied the minds of men, and enlightened them even by means of that which they have thought into it. No other book could have become so well known among so many peoples; and it is unquestionable that the discussion of the same book by men of such widely different tendencies has helped the world forward far more than if each people had received sacred writings of its own. It was necessary that each people should for a time consider this book the *non plus ultra* of spiritual knowledge. Even the youth

[1] S. S. x. p. 318.

must regard his elementary book in this light, that impatience to finish his studies may not urge him to deal with things for which he has not laid the foundation. And still it is of high importance that the New Testament should not be discarded. "Refrain, thou who dost stamp and rage at the last page of this elementary book, from letting thy weaker fellow-pupils perceive what thou dost suspect or hast begun to see. Until they have overtaken thee, these weaker fellow-pupils, turn rather once more to this elementary book, and examine whether that which thou deemest only turns of method, makeshifts of dialectic, is not something better."[1] In the childhood of the race the divine unity was revealed; when it was recognised as a truth of reason, the elementary book containing it was no longer necessary. In the youth of the race the doctrine of immortality was revealed; and now that it has become a doctrine of reason, we may so far do without the elementary book containing it also. May there not be in the New Testament other doctrines which it is well for us to accept as there presented, until they likewise are recognised as truths of reason? Take, for instance, the doctrine of the Trinity. "How if this doctrine were at last to put the human understanding, after endless wanderings to the right and left, upon the way to recognise that God, in the sense in which finite things are one, cannot possibly be one; that His unity must be a kind of transcendental unity, which does not exclude a kind of multiplicity?"[2] God must have an idea of Himself: an idea containing all that is included in Him. But necessary existence is an essential element in the conception of God. Hence the idea He has of Himself must include that of necessary existence: that is, it is as necessary as Himself. My reflection in a mirror cannot be properly compared to this idea; for my whole being is not reflected. The idea which God has of Himself is an absolute reflection of His nature. Now, how could this doctrine be made popular better than

[1] S. S. x. p. 320. [2] S. S. x. p. 321.

by the statement that God has a Son begotten from all eternity? So of the doctrine of original sin. How if we end by looking upon this as meaning that at the earliest and lowest stages of humanity man is not sufficiently master of his actions to follow moral laws? The doctrine of the Satisfaction offered by the Son may be thus transformed:—Notwithstanding this incapacity, God gives men moral laws, and forgives their transgressions for the sake of His Son; that is, for the sake of all the perfections of His own nature, in view of which every imperfection of the individual vanishes. God does this rather than exclude men from moral happiness, which is inconceivable without moral law.

Such treatment of Revelation ought not to be condemned as sophistry, for the transformation of revealed truths into truths of reason is necessary if they are to be of real avail to the human mind. "When they were revealed, they were not yet truths of reason; but they were revealed in order to become such. They were like the *facit* which the arithmetician says beforehand to his pupils, that in reckoning they may to some extent arrange their ideas according to it. If the pupils contented themselves with the *facit* said beforehand, they would never learn arithmetic, and would badly attain the end for the sake of which the good master gives them a clue to their work. And why may not we in like manner, by means of a religion whose historic truth, if you will, seems so doubtful, be led to nearer and better ideas of the divine nature, of our own nature, of our relations to God: ideas at which the human understanding of itself could never have arrived?"[1]

Speculation on such subjects is sometimes denounced as injurious to society; but what is injurious is not speculation, but the tyranny which would suppress it. Such speculation, whatever its issue in details, is the most appropriate exercise of the human understanding. If the latter could be confined to what concerns merely our physical

[1] S. S. x. p. 323.

needs, it would be dulled rather than whetted. "It must be exercised on spiritual subjects if it is to attain its full enlightenment, and to produce that purification of the heart which makes us capable of loving virtue for its own sake." [1]

But this process of education cannot go on for ever; it must have an end. "What is trained is trained to something. The flattering prospects which are opened before the youth, the honour, the dignity, mirrored before him: what are they but the means of making him a man who, even when these prospects of honour and dignity fall away, will be capable of doing his duty? Human education aims at this, and divine education will not reach so far? What art succeeds in achieving with the individual, nature will not succeed in achieving with the whole? Blasphemy! blasphemy! No; it will come, it will certainly come, the time of consummation, when man, the more convinced he is of an ever-better future, will have no need to borrow from the future motives for his actions. For he will do what is right because it is right, not because arbitrary rewards are attached to it, which were intended merely to fix and strengthen his wandering attention, so that he might recognise its inward better rewards. It will certainly come, the time of this new eternal gospel, which is promised us even in the elementary book of the New Covenant." [2]

Perhaps certain enthusiasts of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, who talked of three ages of the world, had caught a ray of this new eternal gospel. They were only wrong in supposing that the third age was at hand; that their contemporaries, who had scarce outgrown spiritual childhood, could without enlightenment, without preparation, at once become men. The enthusiast has often a true perception of the future; but what nature takes thousands of years to accomplish he wishes to see ripened in a moment. "Advance at thy imperceptible

[1] S. S. x. p. 323. [2] S. S. x. p. 324.

pace, eternal Providence! But let me not, because it is imperceptible, despair of thee! Let me not despair of thee even if thy steps should seem to me to go backwards! It is not true that the straight line is always the shortest. On thy eternal path thou hast so much to bring with thee, so many side steps to take!" [1]

The education of the race, which is being thus slowly but surely achieved, must be experienced by every individual man. But how is this possible in the course of a single life? Lessing boldly solves the problem by means of the theory of the transmigration of souls. "Why may not every individual man have existed more than once in this world?" That the hypothesis is the oldest is to him an argument in its favour, since the mind, uninfluenced by sophistry, was then more likely to hit upon the truth. He suggests that a man may have to return to the world as often as he is destined to acquire new knowledge, new dispositions. It is no objection that we forget our previous lives, since the memory of them would certainly not help us to make a better use of the present. Besides, what we now forget may at some future period in the progress of the spirit be recalled. To the argument that a great deal of time would be lost in this way, he replies: "Lost? And what, then, have I to lose? Is not the whole of eternity mine?" [2]

III.

It would be impossible for those who start from the idea of Revelation to accept this theory as an adequate answer to Reimarus. Their fundamental belief is that truth, which is designed for all nations and for all time, has been revealed to man. Here, however, as in "Nathan," Christianity is deprived of its absolute character: it is represented as a faith which the world is destined to leave, like other faiths, far behind it. Moreover, the theory implies throughout that the whole conception of Revelation may be very easily

[1] S. S. x. p. 325. [2] S. S. x. p. 326.

dispensed with. The object of Revelation is said to be, to put men more quickly in possession of certain truths than they could become possessed of them without supernatural aid. But it is shown that the Persians attained, by the use of reason alone, the idea of divine unity earlier than the Jews, and that the Jews owed it in its pure form to Persian influence. The conception of God which the Jews are said to have had is one that could have been developed even among a rude people from their own reflections. As for the doctrine of immortality, there is no reason why that should not have been preached with practical power by one who was no more than a man. Indeed, Lessing significantly indicates that although we may make full use of the truth Christ proclaimed, we may not now be able to prove his wonderful deeds or his divine mission. No claim is advanced for the remaining doctrines which are to be transformed into truths of reason, that they were supernaturally communicated to the apostles.

Lessing never intended the work to be taken seriously as an apology for Revelation. In its apologetic character it was sent forth, as he told Elise Reimarus, merely as a diversion for the theologians. It would puzzle them, turn their attention in a new direction, perhaps excite thought; and he could wish for no better result.

We may, then, altogether overlook the form of the work as unimportant, and occupy ourselves solely with its essence. Read in this light, it was one of the most suggestive treatises published in Lessing's time. One of its fundamental ideas has already been stated: that no positive religion has a right to claim supremacy. Each is fitted only for the needs of particular races and particular times, and, like faded leaves, must fall when the buds of a new spring begin to shoot forth. Here we have the real ground of that tolerance of which Nathan and Saladin are the ideal representatives. If a man believes that he possesses a truth without which the race must perish, it is impossible for him to look with calmness on opposed faiths. Let him

become convinced that there is no truth essential to mankind to which all have not equal access, and it will seem strange to him that any one should wish to restrain the free intellectual impulses of his fellows.

But this is only a negative side of Lessing's thought. One of its positive sides—and here again we are on a track on which we have before seen him—is that while no historical religion is absolute, each has a relative worth. It was, as already mentioned, the fashion of the time among those who had ceased to believe in the supernatural character of Christianity to rail against it as an invention of priests. Voltaire and those who with him carried on the crusade against "The Infamous" in France may well be excused if their tone was that of fierce and uncompromising enemies; for in their country the Church had become the supreme foe of culture; it was the main support of the grinding tyranny from which the Revolution was at last the only possible mode of escape. Nevertheless, as all thoughtful men are now ready to admit, their mode of regarding Christianity was essentially unjust; and of those who had emancipated themselves from the bondage of theology Lessing was the first to point this out. We cannot now, indeed, accept all his ideas as to the indebtedness of the world to Christianity. The so-called truth of reason, for instance, into which he resolves the doctrine of the Trinity, is not one which provides healthy nourishment either for heart or intellect. It is in reality a play upon words on a subject beyond the range of the human faculties: an attempt to define and explain noumena. On the whole, the doctrine of the Trinity is most at home in the creeds, and cuts a somewhat uncouth figure when transferred, whether by Lessing or by Hegel, to the realm of philosophy. If Lessing's explanation on this point is thrust aside, we must give up as a matter of course his rationalising account of the doctrine of Satisfaction; and the belief that at the earliest and lowest stages of humanity man is not sufficiently master of his actions to follow a

moral law, is one which might readily have been held without the aid of the doctrine of original sin. These "truths of reason" have no real connection with the dogmas by which they are supposed to be reached. To the Christian the Trinity is of little importance unless the Eternal Son is to be identified with the historical Christ; and no Satisfaction for sin is of the smallest interest that was not offered in his death. But Lessing dissociates the Trinity and the Atonement altogether from the historical Christ; they become in his hands abstract principles, resting upon no kind of philosophical evidence, and necessarily without the least influence upon conduct.

But if Christianity has not enriched the human race in this particular way, how great, and, on the whole, noble a part it has played in history! It is the Church that has most effectually softened rude passions, encouraged weakness, denounced and opposed wrong. To it we owe that revelation of the beauty of sorrow, the grandeur of self-sacrifice, which forms the deepest distinction between what is greatest in the modern and what was greatest in the ancient world. And the image of the Divine Son of man spending his life for the poor, pierced for the sake of the men who slew him, bearing his cross by the power of an inexhaustible pity: how much has it not done for the world! Admit that the real was very different from the mythical Jesus; that when the last stroke came he fell like other men into a sleep from which there is no awaking: the legend of his love does not on that account lose its charm, or its power to win men from a degrading materialism. It is ideally true, whether historically true or not, and is the best witness to the essential goodness of the race which has evolved it.

At a time when Europe was in the hands of an innumerable multitude of petty feudal lords, the Church provided the binding principle which maintained a sense of common duties and interests. Its ideas, its aspirations, were those of all the Western lands; and the Papal autho-

rity was the outward symbol of a standard of right by which individuals and nations were bound to measure their claims. When the human intellect, after a long slumber, began to awake, it was in the doctrine of the Church that it found the stone on which to sharpen its faculties. Without Scholasticism a vital element would have been wanting in the progress of thought; and Scholasticism was but the attempt of philosophy to find a ground for Christian theology. At a later period it was in the mythology of Christianity and in the legends of the Church that revived art discovered a field in which it might freely roam. To Mantegna, Raphael, Michael Angelo, and Leonardo, the conceptions which had for centuries formed the intellectual world of Christendom were what the mythology of Greece was to Phidias and Praxiteles. Without Christianity we could not have had the creation of these supreme artists. It provided them with the shapes of beauty, simplicity, and awfulness which their superb genius reproduced on canvas or in marble.

In all its forms Christianity has thus ministered to mankind, for if Protestantism has been less pathetic, less ideal in its touch than Catholicism, it has fostered that independence of spirit, that freedom of thought and action, which have since the Reformation changed the face of the world. Even Puritanism, the least attractive of religious movements, has at any rate infused into those whom it has influenced a vein of earnestness, which, when tempered by more lovely qualities, is of enduring benefit to the race.

If all this is now not only admitted, but gladly maintained, by those who no longer stand within the Church, the fact is to a large extent due to Lessing, who had the courage to proclaim to the sceptics of his day that they misunderstood the religion they assailed; that, far from being the vulgar imposition they supposed, it had achieved great things for humanity, while its possibilities of good were still unexhausted. But it was not merely for

Christianity, or for Judaism, from which Christianity sprang, that he claimed a high place in history. His argument was that all positive religions, each in its own way, have been thus beneficial in their time. In the treatise itself he does not directly develop this view; but in the preface he indicates his belief in unmistakable terms. "Why," he asks, "will we not rather recognise in positive religions the direction in which the human understanding has alone been able to develop itself in various places, and may yet farther develop itself, than either smile or scowl at any of them? Nothing in the best of worlds deserves this our anger, this our dislike; and only our religion shall be supposed to deserve it? God has had His hand in everything, but has had nothing to do with our errors?"

These simple words sounded the doom of the only way in which it had as yet occurred to the free-thinking eighteenth century to look upon religions with which it did not agree. They asserted once for all the principle that it is not by trickery that the lives of vast masses of men are controlled from generation to generation. Buddha, Confucius, Zoroaster, Jesus, Mohammed: these men have stamped their names upon the heart of the world, because, notwithstanding the superstition with which their influence is associated, they burned with enthusiasm for this or that aspect of spiritual truth. They came to deliver men from the yoke of vulgar custom; to open to them a large and free life. And the religion of each has done something to idealise common existence, to strengthen the sacred claims of duty. When this principle was once accepted, it was impossible to feel hostility to any great faith; it became the task of thinkers not to rail at religions, but to understand and explain them.

So far the ideas of "The Education of the Human Race" are only in a highly developed form those of which we have already found the germs in "Nathan the Wise." Behind the principle, however, that no positive religion has absolute

truth, yet that each has relative value, there is another and still deeper principle: that there has been in human history a law of progress. This idea has now become so familiar that it is hard to conceive a time when it was wholly unknown. But when Lessing developed it, it had all the charm of novelty. There are, indeed, in many writers of the eighteenth century, hints and indications pointing towards it. Leibnitz especially, in his conception of development, was on a track which, if followed out, would inevitably have led to the theory of progress. In "The Education of the Human Race" the idea was first formally stated; and afterwards, partly through the eloquent speculations of Herder, it gradually became the possession of the whole of cultivated Europe.

The progress which Lessing detected in the course of history was essentially of a moral nature. Men begin by submitting to a moral law, because to disobey it is to incur unpleasant consequences in this world, to yield to it is to reap certain desirable results. By-and-by the consequences are transferred from this world to the next; the moral law is obeyed because of the attractions of heaven, the horrors of hell. At the last and highest stage, all thought of reward and punishment is dismissed. Men do good to their fellows, are loyal, and patient, and self-sacrificing, because these qualities are in themselves the supreme happiness. In the first two stages selfishness is at the root of action: obvious and gross selfishness at the earlier stage, a more refined and disguised selfishness at the later. At the highest point of human development selfishness gives way to pure love, which is its own great reward; which is freely lavished on the evil and the good, whether there is another life or not. Love, in short, becomes heaven; and exclusive regard for self is looked upon as the worst conceivable hell. The age in which this ideal is attained is the age of Lessing's "new eternal gospel."

To make the theory of progress complete, we must assume that there is a steady advance, not only towards

moral perfection, but towards the perfection of all human powers. When we think of ancient Greece, it is at first sight hard to believe in the reality of such an advance; but the true comparison is not between the world as it now is and ancient Greece, but between the world as it now is and the world as it was then. Or rather, the true comparison is between the modern man, living under just laws, and enjoying art, literature, and science, and the primitive man, crouching before his fetish, perhaps not intelligent enough to have risen to the conception of a fetish, in mind and body but slightly distinguished from the lower forms of animal life from which he had emerged. How vast is the gulf between the two! How much more splendid has been the progress of humanity than the scientific conceptions of Lessing's time allowed him to suspect!

Regarding progress as the progress of the whole man, we may greatly extend Lessing's conception of the education of the race. Not only religions, but all high manifestations of the human spirit, have exercised an educating influence. In art, poetry, philosophy, science, politics, morality, industry, no generation starts afresh; each inherits a vast product, which sums up the conquests of all previous generations. Modern life is a stream ever deepening and widening, whose origin is lost in a remote past, to whose volume innumerable rills from innumerable mountains and valleys incessantly contribute their waters. How splendid an element would be struck out of the world of to-day if Athens had never existed! In their turn the Greeks were indebted in a measure we as yet but imperfectly comprehend to their Egyptian, Assyrian, and Persian predecessors. The whole of European society is to a large extent built upon foundations laid during the periods of the political and ecclesiastical supremacy of Rome. And behind all that the cultivated races have left to the world are the dim ages in which man feebly battled with nature, and slowly rose to the elementary forms of social union.

A vast amount of nonsense has been talked in the name

of the idea of progress, as if it meant that because we have telegraphs, newspapers, and steam-boilers, we are therefore superior to Michael Angelo and Plato. The theory recognises that the present may be in many respects inferior to particular epochs of the past; it only maintains that the race as a whole is steadily rising towards higher levels of physical, intellectual, and moral life. Occasionally individual men and societies spring far ahead of those that are immediately to follow them. These are like one of those perfect days in February which sometimes come to surprise and delight us among the chills of winter. We know that next day there will be hail and snow; but the momentary warmth and brightness we take as harbingers of a better time; we already scent the roses from afar.

Perhaps no single theory has ever been attended by greater results than the theory of progress. It has transformed the whole realm of moral science. We are no longer content to accept ideas, institutions, customs, as we find them; we seek to penetrate to their first germs, follow them through all the stages of their growth, and find in their existing form the last result of innumerable changes. Thus we are able to do justice to the various shapes they have assumed in the long course of their development. It is here we come upon the line which most sharply distinguishes the thought of the eighteenth from the thought of the nineteenth century; and now that the theory of human progress is to some extent merged in the larger theory of organic evolution, the line is daily more firmly drawn.

The idea has been not less effective in the world of action than in the world of speculation. An indistinct perception of it caused the French Revolution, and ever since that tremendous upheaval it has been at the root of almost every serious endeavour to improve the lot of men. He who works under its influence has the glow of dawn upon his face: the dawn of a time that shall far exceed the ages through which humanity has hitherto toiled; a

time when the real world and the ideal shall not be so rudely divorced as they now are. Let a man despair of the future, and his energies are struck with paralysis. Let him share Lessing's belief that the world has been undergoing a process of education, and that this process cannot in the end fail; and there is every reason why the desire to aid it should not only be kindled within him, but should burn with a steady flame. Nothing will so effectually help him to see with calmness what he deems occasional retrogression. Fate, he knows, will not miss its mark because his particular hopes do not happen to be fulfilled.

The idea acts upon men by its backward as well as by its forward reference. If the present is built upon the past, if we owe what is best in our lives to the toil, the sorrow, the joy, the aspiration of those who have gone before us, how closely does not that draw the ties which bind us to our fellows! Humanity becomes invested with almost sacred dignity and beauty. To it belong of right our love and gratitude; and by every obligation that appeals to rational beings who can feel as well as reason we are bound to hand on to our successors, not only uninjured but extended and improved, the inheritance with which we have been enriched by our fathers.

Few thinkers will now accept in Lessing's sense the doctrine—to which we shall have to return—that "the path by which the race reaches its perfection every individual man must sooner or later traverse." Nevertheless, it contains a germ of truth. The ideas and impulses of the child are those which characterise the race at the lowest stage of culture; and the order in which the faculties of the race have been developed is that in which the faculties of the child may also be most effectually called forth. When this fact is thoroughly realised, the study of the process by which mankind have been educated will become the most fruitful source of ideas with respect to the proper education of the individual.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"ERNST AND FALK."

In the latter half of last century nothing was more characteristic of Germany than the prevalent love for secret societies. With no legitimate outlet in public life for superabundant energies, thousands sought in the charms of these associations some compensation for the absence of political rights and duties. None took higher rank among them than the Lodges of Freemasonry. As a rule the Freemasons were animated by no higher motive than an innocent, if somewhat childish, desire to be associated with something that stirred the curiosity of their neighbours; but they were commonly credited with designs of desperate wickedness. And their purposes were supposed to be all the more dangerous from the fact that Freemasonry flourished in nearly every European nation.

In youth Lessing laughed at the absurdities of the Freemasons, and satirised them in an amusing little poem called "The Secret." Afterwards, however, he conceived a wish to learn what it was that had so powerful an attraction for so many minds, and in 1771, during the visit to Hamburg in the course of which he and Eva König were betrothed, he was admitted as a member of one of the Lodges there. "Well," said some one to him after his reception, "you see I told you the truth. You have found nothing against religion or the State?" "Would to heaven I had found something of the kind," replied Lessing; "I should then at any rate have found *something!*"

Notwithstanding this estimate of the terrible mysteries revealed to him, he made Freemasonry the subject of a

good deal of thought and inquiry; and in 1778 he published a little book containing three dialogues, entitled "Ernst and Falk. Dialogues for Freemasons" ("Ernst und Falk. Gespräche für Freymäurer"). They were dedicated to the Duke of Brunswick, who was Grand Master of all German Lodges. Their tone seemed to him so dangerous that Lessing was forbidden to publish a continuation of them. He had already, however, written two more, and they were passed about in manuscript from one Freemason to another. In 1780 they were published without his permission, with a preface from an unknown hand.

Nothing Lessing ever wrote is in form more attractive than these dialogues. The scene is laid at Pyrmont, where Ernst and Falk are drinking the waters. On a lovely summer morning, before breakfast, Falk, who takes the leading part in the conversation, is enjoying the fresh air. To him comes Ernst; but Falk is so absorbed by simple enjoyment of nature that he is unable or unwilling to start a subject of talk. Ernst, however, who has heard that he is a Freemason, asks whether this is true; and so they pass gradually into grave discussion. We are not allowed to lose sight of the pleasant background, for after a time Falk is attracted by a rare butterfly, and starts in pursuit, while Ernst lies down under a tree and watches a colony of ants. Thus the first conversation is interrupted; the second goes on, after Falk's return from the unavailing pursuit of his butterfly, until breakfast. The third takes place at night in Falk's bedroom, whither Ernst follows him to hear the solution of the difficulties suggested in the morning. Between the third and the fourth dialogue a considerable interval passes. Ernst, who has been obliged to return home, has become a Freemason, and is by no means pleased that his friend's remarks should have stimulated him to take so foolish a step. On the forenoon on which they meet, therefore, they at once begin on the old topic; and the talk proceeds till dinner, after which comes the fifth dialogue. The ball is tossed from one to the other with so

much skill and freedom that we are scarce aware we are being seduced into the consideration of serious problems. The two speakers are not the mere lay figures who usually, in such dialogues, carry on a sham debate; they are conceived with dramatic force, and express their ideas in lively, terse, and epigrammatic language. Yet the play of statement and counter-statement is so managed that we advance from stage to stage in precise and logical order.

Although Freemasonry is the nominal subject of the work, its real interest is concentrated in the ideas it contains respecting society. In a few years after its publication, it must be remembered, the Bastille fell; and the forces which led to that stroke of destiny were already deeply, although silently, agitating Europe. One of these forces was the passion for what was supposed to be the natural as opposed to the social state: a passion which owed its intensity more to the influence of Rousseau than to that of any other writer. If man could but once more return to his native wilds! In idyllic simplicity he would then pass his days, inequality and crime and war being replaced by a reign of universal benevolence! The conventional would be thrust aside, and the individual would find free scope for the instincts and impulses implanted in him by a higher power! The sober citizens of the epoch can hardly have been deeply impressed by these visions, but the youth of Germany, still more than that of France, was kindled into rapture by them; and even in palaces there were not wanting enthusiasts for the noble savage.

Lessing so far shared the preference for a supposed natural state that he considered the ideal society one in which there would be no government. "What activity and yet what order!" exclaims Ernst, calling Falk's attention to the ants he has been studying under the tree.[1] "Every one carries, and drags, and pushes; and not one is a hindrance to the

[1] Sämmtliche Schriften, x. p. 257.

rest. See, they even help one another." "Ants," replies Falk, "live in society, like bees."

"*Ernst.*—And in a still more wonderful society than bees, for they have among them no member that holds them together and rules them.

"*Falk.*—Order, then, may be able to exist without government.

"*Ernst.*—If each individual is able to govern himself, why not?"

A society of developed men who stand in no need of law because they have acquired absolute self-control: that was the end to which Lessing looked forward as the highest point mankind could reach. But through both Ernst and Falk he expresses doubt whether the ideal can ever become more than an ideal. At any rate, in the meantime, social organisation is absolutely necessary; and Falk asserts that "in civil society alone human reason can be cultivated." As to the origin of society Lessing hazards no theory. He contents himself with saying that "nature had so arranged everything that man must very soon have hit upon this discovery."[1] We now know that man by no means hits "very soon" on any save the most elementary forms of social life; but it is evident that Lessing was thinking of genuinely historical causes, not of such figments as Rousseau's *Contrat Social.*

While civil life is necessary and beneficial, Lessing earnestly combats those who overrate its importance. The tendency of the whole of ancient Greek life was to sacrifice the individual to the State; and the belief that the welfare of the State is the end, that of the individual the means, has not died out in modern Europe. But says Falk:[2] "States unite men that through and in this union every individual man may the better and more surely enjoy his share of welfare. The total of the welfare of all its members is the welfare of the State; besides this there is none. Every other kind of welfare of the State, where-

[1] S. S. x. p. 259. [2] S. S. x. p. 258.

by individuals suffer and must suffer, is a cloak for tyranny. Nothing else!" Ernst heartily agrees. "As if nature," he exclaims, "could have intended the welfare of an abstract idea like State, Fatherland, and the like, rather than that of each real individual!"

To appreciate the courage of one who not only asserted this principle, but dedicated the work containing it to a reigning Prince, we must again recall the political condition of Germany at that time. Frederick the Great, indeed, professed to be but the first servant of his people; and on the whole he was loyal to this conception of his position. But, as we have already seen, he was a brilliant exception.[1] Of the three hundred princes and more, with their ministers, who were absolute masters of the nation, only a very few looked upon their subjects as having any other function in the world than to supply the wants of "the State:" that is, of the petty minority who lived in idleness by the labour of the majority. It was indeed a surprise for them to hear that they had reversed the true order; that they existed for the people, not the people for them.

Does it follow from this principle that the State must simply discharge the duties of police, protecting each individual in his rights, and leaving everything else to the chances of the struggle for existence and happiness? Or does the State act as a true means to a true end by recognising that the conditions of the struggle bear hardly upon some classes and unduly favour others? And if it does, how far is it justified in compelling the strong to sacrifice something for the benefit of the weak? To what extent may it endeavour to distribute more equally the good things that fortune has so recklessly divided among men?

[1] "If I rightly examine myself," says Lessing in one of his fragmentary notes, "I envy all existing reigning kings in Europe, with the single exception of the King of Prussia, who alone proves by deeds that royal dignity is a glorious slavery" (S. S. xi. (2), p. 405.) The note which follows this may here find a place:—"God has no wit, and kings also should have none. For if a king has wit, who will guarantee us against the danger that he may pronounce unjust sentences because he can make them the occasion of witty strokes?"

These are very urgent questions—first started, in the form in which they are now discussed in Germany, by Lassalle—for the nineteenth century; but in the eighteenth they had not emerged, and Lessing gives us no help towards their settlement.

With striking power, however, he dwells upon certain evils which necessarily attend the existence of States; and it is here we most distinctly see how completely he was a man of the future, notwithstanding his knowledge of, and reverence for, the past. The first evil is that the world is divided into nations.

"*Falk.*—Let us assume that the best constitution has been discovered; let us assume that all men live under this best constitution: would all men in the world constitute a single State on that account?

"*Ernst.*—Hardly. So enormous a State could not be administered. It would, therefore, have to be divided into several small States, which should all be administered according to the same laws.

"*Falk.*—That is: men would still be Germans and Frenchmen, Dutchmen and Spaniards, Russians and Swedes, or however else they are called.

"*Ernst.*—Certainly.

"*Falk.*—Here, then, we have one disadvantage. For each of these smaller States would have its own interests, would it not? And every citizen would regard as his own the interests of his State?

"*Ernst.*—Of course.

"*Falk.*—These different interests would sometimes come into collision, as at present; and two citizens of two different States would be as little able to meet each other without prejudice, as at present a German can meet a Frenchman, a Frenchman an Englishman.

"*Ernst.*—Very probably.

"*Falk.*—That is: if at present a German meets a Frenchman, a Frenchman an Englishman, or *vice versâ*, they do not meet merely as men, who because of their similar nature

are attracted to each other; they meet as men of a particular kind, who are conscious of each other's tendency, which makes them cold, reserved, distrustful towards each other before they have had the smallest opportunity of personal intercourse.

"*Ernst.*—That is unfortunately true.

"*Falk.*—Then it is also true that the means which unites men, in order through this union to secure their happiness, at the same time separates men." [1]

How suggestive this is at a time when so many cultivated men all over the Western world seem to have forgotten that the cosmopolitan idea was ever seriously held! No one who has read thus far can be ignorant that Lessing distinctly recognised that each man has a duty to his own nation, or can suppose that he himself failed in his duty to Germany. By every means in his power he strove to restore to her a sense of vigour and independence; and, except Frederick the Great, no one did so much to achieve that end. But never did he forget the larger in the smaller duty: the duty of man to man. Germans were interesting to him not as Germans, but because they were part of humanity, and because through them he could best serve humanity. If he wrote much against the French, he did not do so from a feeling of jealousy and intolerance. He knew well how to appreciate those splendid qualities which have for centuries given so great a charm to France, and which she has not yet lost; but the intellectual life of the Germans was crushed by their stupid worship of France, and he could give them freedom only by dealing at their idol the heaviest blows he could strike. Hence his writings do not express his whole mind respecting France. They contain in the most violent possible form his negative judgments; the time was not adapted for the statement of his positive opinions. Is it too much to say that if he lived now his object would be not to excite a prejudice against France, but to do justice to her achievements and virtues?

[1] S. S. x. p. 260.

The next point he notes is that the division into States separates men by causing differences of religion. "Many of the smaller States," says Falk, "would have [that is, even assuming them to live under the best constitution] quite different climates, consequently quite different wants and enjoyments, consequently quite different manners and customs, consequently quite different moral doctrines, consequently quite different religions. Do you not think so?" —"That," replies Ernst, "is a prodigious step!"[1] It is indeed! "Quite different, climates . . . consequently quite different religions!" This ought to satisfy those who most vehemently emphasise the influence of outward conditions upon thought; but, after all, we must not quite take Falk at his word. At least, we must not suppose that Falk here gives us Lessing's complete theory. He did, indeed, as we have seen, trace back the growth of historical religions to natural causes; but no one knew better that of these causes, to say the least, climate is only one, and not the most important. His main point is that the world cannot have States without different religions. Hence Christians, Jews, Turks, do not meet as men any more than Germans and Frenchmen, Frenchmen and Englishmen; they meet as the upholders of rival creeds, and thus put forth demands which it would not occur to men to assert in a natural condition.

The existence of States not only implies the separation of men into nations and into bodies that uphold particular creeds; it implies painful differences among the inhabitants of each country. The most zealous enthusiast for equality could not more clearly recognise the evils which spring from inequality. "Conceive," says Falk, "how few evils there are in the world which have not their ground in this difference of ranks."[2] And Ernst has nothing to oppose to this view. Lessing, however, diverges widely from those who think equality attainable; he represents it as wholly beyond reach. "Do you think," Falk asks,[1]

[1] S. S. x. p. 262. [2] S. S. x. p. 264.

"that a State is conceivable without difference of ranks? Be it good or bad, more or less near perfection, it is impossible that all its members can have the same relation to each other. Even if they all take part in legislation, they cannot all take an equal part, at least an equally immediate part. There will, therefore, be more distinguished and less distinguished members. Even if all the possessions of the State were to be divided among them equally, this equal division would not last two generations. One would use his property better than another. One would have to divide his badly used property equally among more successors than another. There would, therefore, be richer and poorer members."

The enemies of Socialism have not even yet forged against it a more effective weapon than the last of these arguments.

One who saw so clearly the evils which attend the existence of States must have had a very distinct perception of the evils in the particular State to which he belonged. This is decisively indicated in a little fragment included among his posthumous writings.[2] "Is it not terrible," asks *A.* of *B.*, "to think that we have more monks than soldiers?

"*B.*—You mean to say that there are far more soldiers than monks.

"*A.*—No! no! More monks than soldiers.

"*B.*—As regards this and that European country, you may be right. But as regards Europe generally? If the farmer sees his seed destroyed by slugs and mice, what is terrible to him in that? That there are more slugs than mice? Or that there are so many slugs and so many mice?

"*A.*—I do not understand that.

"*B.*—Because you will not. What, then, are soldiers?

"*A.*—Defenders of the State.

"*B.*—And monks are the supports of the Church.

"*A.*—Pooh! your Church!

[1] S. S. x. p. 264.

[2] S. S. xi. (2), p. 252.

"*B.*—Pooh! your State!

"*A.*—Are you dreaming? The State! The State! The happiness which the State secures to every individual member in this life!

"*B.*—The blessedness which the Church promises every man after this life!

"*A.*—Promises!

"*B.*—Blockhead!"

In this lively dialogue Lessing does much more than place monks and soldiers on a level; he unmistakably implies that the State does not exercise its true functions, that it fails in its highest duties. And had there existed in Germany the active political life of England, it is clear that there would have been no more stern critic of the misdeeds of its petty rulers.

The more ardent spirits of the time would willingly have had recourse to violent remedies; they hailed the French Revolution with unbounded delight and hope. Lessing, as if he had some dim anticipation of what was coming, expresses himself as decidedly opposed to the revolutionary method. At the beginning of the fifth dialogue, immediately before which the two friends have dined in the company of some guests of Falk's, Ernst bursts forth into a tirade against a noisy person, "with a wart on his chin," who had been talking violently of Freemasonry. "He is," says Falk, "one of those who fight in Europe for the Americans."—"That," Ernst interrupts, "would not be the worst thing in him."[1] We may take this as a hint that in the struggle of the British colonies with the mother country, Lessing shared the sympathies of Burke and Chatham, and nearly all the noblest Englishmen of the time: the Englishmen who could see that for once England was playing the tyrant, and fighting against the stars in their courses. It seems, however, that there were Freemasons who fancied that Congress was a Lodge, and that their brethren were about "with armed hand" to

[1] S. S. x. p. 293.

revolutionise society in America. Of these, the man who had stirred the ire of Ernst was one.

"*Ernst.*—By heaven, if I thought I had been thus deceived in the Freemasons!

"*Falk.*—Do not fear. The Freemason calmly awaits the rising of the sun, and lets the lights burn as long as they can and will. To put out the lights, and after they have been put out to learn that the stumps must again be kindled, or that other lights must be set up: that is not the affair of the Freemason.

"*Ernst.*—That I think too. What costs blood is certainly not worth blood.

"*Falk.*—Excellent!"[1]

If Lessing is to be understood as approving the American rebellion, he must have accepted the latter principle with considerable modifications. And as regards the Revolution which was so soon to come, the analogy of the lights certainly does not prove that it was unjustifiable; for the choice was not between lights actually in existence and utter darkness. Rather, while the dawn was glowing across the sky, a selfish class persisted in closing every opening by which it might have streamed in upon the multitude, and in burning torches that only smoked and sputtered.

As a rule, however, Lessing preferred that that which had been handed down from the past should, if possible, be retained, although altered to suit the changed conditions in the present. Hence he occupied himself seriously with the study of the ancient liberties of Germans; and in an article on "German Freedom," in his "Collectanea,"[2] he bitterly complains that the inhabitants of the various States have been deprived of their due share of public life. "Should we not," he says, "incessantly protest against these unjust changes, instead of justifying by flattery the actions of the great?" He desired to see the Diets restored where they had been abolished, and strengthened

[1] S. S. x. p. 294. [2] S. S. xi. (1), p. 381.

where they had been nominally retained. To preserve the continuity of history, to balance the claims of the future and the past, to give up nothing that is of good service until something has been provided to replace it, always, if possible, to start from the actually existing in attempting to reach a new goal: these were, in his opinion, the true aims of statesmen. There was a touch of conservatism in his convictions; but it was the conservatism of one who would have been ever advancing, ever ready to detect new manifestations of life, ever welcoming them as the best guarantees of progress and freedom.

It followed, as a matter of course, that there was no single political constitution which he looked upon as absolutely the best. Everything depended upon the stage of culture reached by a nation. Here an enlightened despotism, there a republic, elsewhere a constitutional monarchy, would most readily adapt itself to the needs of men. The one important consideration was, that the upholders of each method should not cling to it mechanically, should not confound the end with the means, should never forget that the true object of every form of government is to bring the world a little nearer the point at which government will no longer be indispensable.

It is at first sight hard to perceive what possible connection all this can have with Freemasonry; and with Freemasonry as it is, or as it has ever been, the connection is certainly slight. His theory was this. To the necessary evils which accompany the social state we must force ourselves to submit; we enjoy the warmth of the fire, and must take the smoke along with it. At the same time, there is no harm in providing chimneys. Now, are there no means of mitigating these evils? There are; such means are to be found in the presence, in each State, of men "who have risen above national prejudices, and know exactly where patriotism ceases to be a virtue;" "who are not subject to the prejudices of their inherited religion, do not believe that everything is necessarily good and true

which they recognise as good and true;" "whom social dignity does not blind, and social insignificance does not repel; to whose company the high gladly condescend and the humble confidently rise."[1] The object of Freemasonry, Lessing maintains, is to bring such men together, so to organise them that their influence on society shall produce the largest possible effect.

He knew perfectly well that Freemasonry was far indeed from realising this ideal. "That equality," says Ernst, after he has become a Freemason, "which you represented to me as the fundamental law of the order, that equality which filled my soul with such unexpected hope: the hope to be able at last to breathe in the society of men who know how to think away all social modifications without sinning against any one to the disadvantage of a third person"——

"*Falk.*—Well?

"*Ernst.*—If I had only found it so! But let an enlightened Jew come and announce himself! 'A Jew?' they say. 'The Freemason must at least be a Christian. Only what kind of Christian is indifferent. Without distinction of religion means without distinction of the three religions openly tolerated in the Holy Roman Empire'—do you think so, too?

"*Falk.*—Certainly not.

"*Ernst.*—Let an honest cobbler, who has leisure enough in his calling to have many a good thought (be it even a Jacob Böhme or a Hans Sachs)—let such an one come and announce himself! 'A cobbler?' they say. 'A cobbler forsooth!' Let a faithful, experienced, tried servant come and announce himself! 'But,' they say, 'people who do not themselves choose the colour of their coat—we are such good society!'

"*Falk.*—How, then, are they such good society?

"*Ernst.*—Well, I have nothing to say about that, except that they are the good society one is so tired of in

[1] S. S. xii. p. 260.

the world—Princes, Counts, Herr vons, officers, councillors of all kinds, merchants, artists—all these, indeed, without distinction of rank, associate together; but in reality they are all of one rank, and that unfortunately is——

"*Falk.*—In my time that was not so."[1]

The childish absurdities of the Freemasons are ridiculed as heartily as their exclusiveness is denounced. Lessing gets out of the difficulty by the principle that "Lodges hold to Freemasonry the relation which churches hold to the creed." "From the outward prosperity of the church nothing, nothing whatever, is to be deduced regarding the creed of the members. Rather, there is a certain outward prosperity which could co-exist with the true creed only by a miracle. The two have never been in alliance, but the one, as history teaches, has always brought the other to the ground."[2] In other words, Lessing is not speaking of Freemasonry as it is, but of Freemasonry as it might be: that is, not of any real cosmopolitan society, but of a cosmopolitan society which, if it existed, would be of high advantage to the world. Hence Falk is most persistent in asserting that men can discharge what he considers the duties of Freemasons without being outwardly associated with a Lodge. "Go," he says,[3] "and study those evils [which spring from the existence of States], learn to know them all, balance all their influences against each other; and be assured that this study will explain to you things which in days of depression appear to be the most damaging, the most inexplicable accusations against Providence and virtue. This explanation, this enlightenment will make you calm and happy, even without being *called* a Freemason." "You lay so much emphasis," replies Falk, "on this *being called?*" "Because one may be something without being called it."

Here, then, we have Lessing's last word on the true relations of man to man. The distinctions which mark men off from each other are so many and so imposing

[1] S. S. x. p. 290. [2] S. S. x. p. 292. [3] S. S. x. p. 270.

that the majority never even attempt to penetrate beyond them. Lessing, however, strips off the outward covering to reach the inward reality. He does not deny the distinctions that exist, he does not pretend that so long as there are States they can be done away with; but he looks them in the face, and finds that their importance is only in name. What does it matter, he virtually asks, that a man is a prince or a cobbler, an Englishman or a Russian, a Christian or a Mohammedan? He is still a man, and in his manhood are his true greatness and dignity. This is the very kernel, the most vital truth, of democracy; and because of it, Lessing may be claimed as, in temper and character, one of the first and most genuine of modern democrats.

CHAPTER XXIX.

LESSING'S PHILOSOPHY.

I.

IT would have been impossible for a mind like Lessing's to remain indifferent to the great problems of philosophy. Never content with half explanations, he was inevitably driven back in testing opinions to the last grounds of truth; and there is evidence that from early manhood he strove to conquer for himself a coherent theory of the world. During the greater part of his life the dominant philosophy was that of Wolf, and at the time when, as an ardent young thinker, he attended the disputations of Kästner in Leipzig, it was probably this he chiefly studied. He very soon, however, became discontented with so unsatisfactory a guide. If we take a broad view of the development of philosophy, an honourable place will not be denied to Wolf, for at a time when French and Latin were thought to be the only languages in which a German could express a serious thought, he had the courage to state his ideas in his native speech, and his aim was to produce not only a comprehensive but a thoroughly logical system. In comparison with a true philosopher, however, he was what a versifier is in comparison with a true poet. He lacked the genius which gives vitality to abstract truth; which causes principles to germinate and bear fruit in the minds of those who receive them. The suggestive hints of Leibnitz became in his hands uninspiring dogmas; and frequently there was a formidable display of logical method to establish platitudes which it would have occurred to no mortal to dispute. It was not strange, therefore, that Lessing speedily

derived from him all the benefit it was in his power to confer, and proceeded to a very different thinker, Leibnitz, to whom Wolf owed whatever element of attraction existed in his ponderous tomes.

The evidence of Lessing's early reading of Leibnitz is best seen in the essay on "Pope a Metaphysician," which he wrote in association with Mendelssohn. The two friends helped each other to a deeper acquaintance with the great master, and there can be little doubt that they carried on together serious and persistent study of the English philosophers, especially Locke and Shaftesbury. The name of Shaftesbury has repeatedly occurred in the preceding pages. In his own country he was allowed comparatively soon to drop out of sight; but on the Continent he remained during the greater part of last century one of the most powerful philosophical influences. Even Leibnitz owed to him many important suggestions. Lessing read him diligently, and obtained from him valuable guidance and stimulus.

We know that by 1754 he was to some extent acquainted with Spinoza, for it will be remembered that in that year he wrote of Mendelssohn to Michaelis: "His candour and his philosophical spirit cause me to regard him in anticipation as a second Spinoza, for perfect resemblance with whom he will lack nothing but Spinoza's errors." In Breslau, as has been repeatedly mentioned, he devoted himself earnestly to the study of this philosopher. Now that the philosophy of Spinoza is universally admitted to be one of the most important developments of modern thought, there seems nothing very surprising in the fact that Lessing busied himself with the "Ethics" and the "Tractatus Theologico-Politicus;" but in his day the author of these treatises was very differently regarded. Bayle, usually so free and so fair, was utterly unjust to Spinoza; and it was mainly from Bayle that students of the eighteenth century drew their opinions respecting him. This was true of Voltaire, and even, to a large extent, of Leibnitz; and when such men as these did not think it worth

while to go to the fountain-head, it was a matter of course that ordinary students should content themselves with second-hand assertions. The general view was that Spinoza was a common Atheist, and for an Atheist no condemnation was too severe. The very intensity of the popular dislike of him excited Lessing's interest, and was sufficient reason why he should not be satisfied with repeating the interpretations of others. We can readily imagine his surprise and pleasure in discovering the contrast between the real Spinoza and the Spinoza of polemical writers. He expressed the opinion to his Breslau friends, that of all who had professed to expound Spinoza's system, Bayle had understood him least.

That Lessing's study of Spinoza at this time was ardent and profound is clear from a note addressed to Mendelssohn, in 1763, on an assertion made by the latter to the effect that Leibnitz had obtained the doctrine of pre-established harmony from Spinoza. Lessing is of opinion that Leibnitz was put upon the track of this principle by Spinoza, since the latter was the first "whose system led him to the possibility that all changes of the body might result solely from its own mechanical forces." But Leibnitz owed no larger debt than this to his predecessor. Spinoza himself could not possibly have believed in a pre-established harmony, for to him "body and soul were one and the same thing, which may be conceived now under the attribute of thought, now under the attribute of extension." "What sort of harmony," continues Lessing, "could have occurred to him in connection with such a statement? The greatest, it may be said: that which the thing has with itself. But is not that to play with words? The harmony which the thing has with itself! By his harmony Leibnitz wishes to solve the problem of the union of two such different beings as soul and body. Spinoza, on the contrary, sees here nothing different, sees, therefore, no union, sees no problem to be solved."[1]

[1] Sämmtliche Schriften, xi. (1), p. 135.

Philosophical study was probably interrupted during the years which followed his residence at Breslau; but in Wolfenbüttel he could hardly help going back to his old inquiries. Now it was Leibnitz who again chiefly occupied his attention. A collected edition of the works of Leibnitz, by Raspe, had been published in 1765; and among other writings published for the first time it included "Les Nouveaux Essais sur l'Entendement Humain," the well-known treatise written in opposition to Locke. Lessing was more deeply impressed than ever by the splendour of Leibnitz's power. He resolved to write an account of his life and opinions, and for this purpose began to make extracts from his works and jotted down the main incidents of his career. "Leibnitz's ideas of truth," said Lessing in a conversation with Jacobi to which reference will immediately be made, "were so formed that he could not bear to see too narrow limits set to it. From this mode of thought many of his statements have flowed, and it is often hard for the most acute student to discover his real opinion. For that very reason I think so highly of him; I mean, on account of this great manner of thinking, not on account of this or that opinion, which he appeared to hold or even actually held." "If it depended upon me," he had written years before, "he should not have produced a line in vain." It was because of this reverence for the philosopher that he included in his "Contributions" the papers entitled "Leibnitz on Eternal Punishment," and "The Objections of Andreas Wissowatius to the Trinity:" articles whose real value, however, consists rather in Lessing's comments than in the brief statements by Leibnitz which he chooses as his texts.

II.

What were the positive results at which Lessing arrived? No question in connection with his life is more difficult to answer, and it has received many various replies. The dis-

cussion was first raised by Jacobi, the author of "Allwill" and "Woldemar." In 1780 he paid a visit to Lessing at Wolfenbüttel, and had long and earnest conversations with him on philosophical questions. Two years after Lessing's death Jacobi heard that Mendelssohn intended to write some account of his friend, and, in a letter to Elise Reimarus, begged her to let him know that Lessing had become a thorough disciple of Spinoza. Mendelssohn expressed doubts; whereupon began one of the most famous controversies of the time, Mendelssohn regarding the assertion that Lessing was a Spinozist as a libel upon his character; Jacobi on the contrary insisting that every logical thinker, if he trusts solely to logic for his opinions, must end by accepting Spinoza's system. The controversy excited deep and widespread interest, and from it must be dated the beginning of that serious study of Spinoza which, more than any other single cause, if we except the publication of Kant's "Critique of Pure Reason," has revolutionised the whole modern conception of philosophy. Lessing was thus unintentionally the means of doing for Spinoza among his countrymen what he had intentionally done for Shakespeare.

In the course of the discussion Jacobi communicated the very words of part of his conversation with Lessing: words which he had written down within a few days of his visit, while all that had passed was still fresh in his memory.[1] It was on July 5, 1780, that he arrived in Wolfenbüttel. Next morning, while he was writing letters in his room, Lessing went in, and Jacobi handed him some things from his portfolio to read. Lessing read them, and on returning them asked if he had nothing more. "Certainly," replied Jacobi, "here is another poem. You have given offence so often, you may now take it for once yourself." It was the monologue with which Goethe's "Prometheus" closes. The work as we now possess it had not then been published, so that this

[1] Jacobi's Werke, th. iv. abth. i.

fragment of it seemed to most readers almost unintelligible.

Lessing read it, and returning it said: "I have not taken offence. All that I had long ago from the fountain-head."

By which he meant that the Pantheism indicated by Goethe he had long ago learned in Spinoza.

"You know the poem?" asked Jacobi.

"*Lessing.*—I have never read the poem, but I think it good.

"*Jacobi.*—Of its kind, I think it so too; else I should not have shown it to you.

"*Lessing.*—I mean something different. The point of view from which the poem is taken is my own point of view. The orthodox ideas of the Deity are no longer for me; I cannot enjoy them. *Ἓν καὶ πᾶν*! I know nothing else. The poem also points in that direction, and I must confess it very much pleases me.

"*Jacobi.*—There you would be in tolerable harmony with Spinoza.

"*Lessing.*—If I were to call myself after any one, I know nobody else I should choose.

"*Jacobi.*—I think Spinoza good enough, but it is a poor redemption we find in his name!

"*Lessing.*—Yes, if you like; and yet do you know anything better?"

At this point the conversation was interrupted; but next day Lessing himself resumed it. "I have come to talk with you," he began, "about my *Ἓν καὶ πᾶν*. You were frightened yesterday." Jacobi explained that he had never expected to find a Spinozist in Lessing; indeed, he had come mainly to receive Lessing's help *against* Spinoza.

"*Lessing.*—You know him, then?

"*Jacobi.*—I think I know him as extremely few have known him.

"*Lessing.*—Then you stand in no need of help. Rather become altogether his friend. There is no other philosophy except the philosophy of Spinoza."

The theory of Jacobi was that although Spinoza's is the only logical system, we are not therefore bound to accept it. Such doctrines as that of the personality of God, he believed, we intuitively perceive; and our intuitive perceptions are rather to be trusted than the most exact demonstration of reason. On his explaining that he believed in "an intelligent, personal cause of the world," Lessing said: "Oh, so much the better! Now I shall hear something quite new!"

"*Jacobi.*—Do not be much elated about that. I get out of the difficulty merely by a *salto mortale;* and you are not usually very fond of seeing people go head over heels.

"*Lessing.*—Do not say that! I am not obliged to follow your example. And you will soon be on your feet again. So, if it is no secret, you must tell it me!"

When Jacobi showed that it was the supposed fatalism of Spinoza he most dreaded, Lessing replied: "I see you would gladly have your will free. I desire no free will. What you have just said does not in the least terrify me. It is one of our human prejudices that we regard thought as the first and chief thing, and try to deduce everything from it; since everything—our ideas included—depends upon higher principles. Extension, motion, thought, are clearly grounded in a higher force, which is far from being exhausted by them. It must be infinitely more excellent than this or that effect; and so there may be for it a kind of enjoyment which not only surpasses all ideas, but lies altogether *outside* of ideas. That *we* can have no consciousness of this, does not make it impossible.

"*Jacobi.*—You go farther than Spinoza. To him *insight* was before everything.

"*Lessing.*—For *man!* He was, however, far from representing our miserable way of acting from design as the highest method, and so putting thought in the highest place."

Mentioning the name of Leibnitz, Lessing said, "I fear he was himself at heart a Spinozist." Afterwards he ad-

mitted that this was going too far, but inquired whether Jacobi thought that "the principles of Leibnitz had made an end of Spinoza." Jacobi replied that, far from thinking this, he believed no system harmonised so well with Spinozism as that of Leibnitz. "I shall give you no rest," answered Lessing. "You must let this parallel be known, for how people still talk of Spinoza as of a dead dog!"

Jacobi spoke enthusiastically of Spinoza's "calm of mind," "the intellectual heaven he had created for himself."

"*Lessing.*—And you are not a Spinozist, Jacobi?

"*Jacobi.*—No, upon my honour!

"*Lessing.*—Upon my honour, then, you must with your philosophy turn your back upon *all* philosophy.

"*Jacobi.*—Why turn my back upon all philosophy?

"*Lessing.*—Well, because you are a perfect sceptic.

"*Jacobi.*—On the contrary, I withdraw from a philosophy which makes perfect scepticism necessary.

"*Lessing.*—And go—whither?"

Jacobi having explained himself, Lessing answered (alluding to the fact that the Imperial Diet had refused to tolerate the denial of the freedom of the will): "You express yourself almost as vigorously as the decree of the Imperial Diet at Augsburg. But I remain an honourable Lutheran, and maintain the 'more bestial than human error and blasphemy, that there is no free will,' with which the 'clear, pure mind' of your Spinoza was satisfied."

When a man tries to explain everything, Jacobi insisted, he inevitably falls into fatal error.

"*Lessing.*—And he who does not try to explain everything?

"*Jacobi.*—He who tries, not to explain what is incomprehensible, but only to know where its limits begin, and to recognise that it exists: he, I believe, wins in himself most room for genuine human wisdom.

"*Lessing.*—Words, dear Jacobi, words! The limits which you would set cannot be determined. And, on the

other hand, you give free scope to nonsense, dreaming, and blindness."

The conversation thus concluded:—

"*Lessing.*—Your *salto mortale* seems to me not bad, and I understand how a man of head can go head over heels in this way, if only to change his position. Take me with you, if possible.

"*Jacobi.*—If you will only step upon the spring-board that impels me forward, you will go of yourself.

"*Lessing.*—But a leap is also necessary, which I ought not to expect of my old legs and heavy head."

III.

The genuineness of this report has rarely been doubted; and it is so full of life, Jacobi himself so distinctly comes off second best, that it bears all the internal marks of truth. There can be no doubt that Lessing put his opinions in the very strongest form in which they were capable of being expressed. He was confronted by an enthusiast, who fancied he had the key to the riddle of the universe: a key which was to be applied by mere feeling. It was inevitable that Lessing, the cool, logical thinker, shrinking from no conclusion that followed from his principles, should meet his opponent with decision, and emphasise his faith in the power of pure reason. Even thus stimulated, however, it will be observed, he nowhere absolutely commits himself to the whole of Spinoza's doctrine. "If I were to call myself after any one, I know nobody else I should choose." This plainly means—as we should in any case expect—that he called himself after no one; but that, in some respects, there was no philosopher to whom he felt himself so near as to Spinoza. And we shall find this fully supported by his writings.[1]

[1] Guhrauer will not allow that the smallest importance is to be attached to the conversation with Jacobi; and this view is shared by the author of

Unfortunately, we have nothing like a complete statement to guide us. If Lessing ever succeeded in forming a systematic body of philosophic ideas, he never felt impelled to give it systematic shape. We are obliged to content ourselves with a few fragments written at different periods of his life, and a few brief passages scattered among his general works.

The first of his papers which bear on philosophy is a little fragment on the Moravian brethren.[1] It has been ascribed[2] to the year 1755, but was much more probably written, as his brother Karl believed, in 1750.[3] The Moravian brethren were then vehemently decried by orthodox theologians; and in this essay Lessing undertakes to defend them. In doing so he starts with the general proposition that "man was created for action, not for speculation." In early times man limited himself to his proper sphere, in philosophy contenting himself with truths relating to conduct, in religion with the simplest doctrines. In philosophy he gradually passed to more difficult themes. "Heaven, formerly the subject of his admiration, became the field of guessing. Numbers opened a labyrinth of mysteries which were the more pleasant the

the introduction to Lessing's philosophical writings, in Hempel's edition. Both writers consider that Lessing was in the main a disciple of Leibnitz. Schwarz represents him as a Deist, with pantheistic tendencies; and he is followed by Fontanès, who, however, deprives the pantheistic element of nearly all its significance. Heine (in "Ueber Deutschland") pronounces Lessing a Deist on the road to Spinozism. Danzel, whose opinion on every question relating to Lessing carries great weight, believes that his theory of the world is essentially that of Spinoza; and this view is vigorously set forth by Hettner. Dr. Johann Jacoby, in an essay included in Stahr's biography, cuts the knot by regarding the philosophy of Leibnitz as identical with that of Spinoza. He thus makes Lessing agree with both philosophers, and at the same time anticipate the standpoint of Kant! Careful discussions of Lessing's philosophy will be found in Hebler's "Lessingstudien," and in a paper by Dr. Karl Rehorn on "Lessing's Stellung zur Philosophie des Spinoza" (1877). Both emphasise the influence of Leibnitz on Lessing.

[1] S. S. xi. (1), p. 26.

[2] By Danzel.

[3] Karl Lessing does not usually ascribe the fragments to particular dates. The fact that he mentions a date in this instance seems to indicate that he found it on the manuscript.

less relation they had with virtue." Sokrates recalled the Greeks to humbler but more profitable thought. "Foolish mortals!" he cried, "what is above you is not for you! Turn your glance inwards! In your own nature are the unexplored depths wherein you may lose yourselves with advantage. Here search into the most secret corners. Here learn the weakness and the strength, the covert ways and the open outbursts, of your passions! Here set up the kingdom in which you are at once subject and king! Here understand and control the only thing you ought to understand and control: yourselves." The followers of Sokrates did not advance on his path. "Plato began to dream, Aristotle to reason." Thus philosophy descended to modern ages, the world having learned to look upon Plato as divine, upon Aristotle as infallible. "It was time for Descartes to come." "He opened to all the entrance to that temple which had before been carefully guarded by the dignity of these two tyrants." That was his chief merit; the form truth received in his hands was "the more deceptive the more brilliant it was." He was succeeded by two men "who, in spite of their common jealousy, had the same aim." These were Leibnitz and Newton.[1] By the aid of mathematics they conducted man to "the most hidden secrets of nature;" and those who profit by their results make clear with a few figures conclusions which Aristotle would have set forth in "intolerable volumes." "Thus they fill the head, and the heart remains empty. They lead the mind to the remotest heaven, while in feeling it is put by passion below beasts."

In the same way religion had become unpractical when Christ came, and, like Sokrates, conducted men back to life. His doctrines, so long as the Church had to contend with the world, remained practical. But as the soldier, who in war cares only that his sword is sharp, in peace adorns

[1] The mere fact that the name of Spinoza is here omitted suffices to prove that the paper must have been written considerably before 1755. It is inconceivable, also, that at that time Lessing should have written so disrespectfully of Aristotle.

it with gold and precious stones, so the Church did with religious truths. It formed them, when prosperous, into systems; action was forgotten. At the Reformation "superstition fell; but that whereby it was overthrown, reason, which is with so much difficulty kept in its sphere, led men to another wrong path, less removed from the truth but farther from the exercise of the duties of a Christian." Speaking of his own time, Lessing brings out in dark colours the contrast between the practical and the theoretical. "From the point of view of knowledge we are angels, from that of life devils."

The fragment breaks off just as he is approaching his main point, but what he evidently meant to show was, that the Moravian brethren aimed at summoning the world to a good life, and that so far they ill deserved the opprobrium cast upon them. He draws the picture of a practical philosopher, and gives a lively description of the manner in which such a man would be received by philosophers of the ordinary type.

"'Whew!' a proud algebraist would murmur, 'you are, my friend, a philosopher? Let us see. You know how to find the cubic content of a hyperbolic conoid? Or rather—can you differentiate an exponential quantity? It is a trifle; afterwards we shall try our hands at something greater. You shake your head? You cannot? Well, I shall soon wager you do not know what an irrational quantity is? And yet you pretend to be a philosopher? O confusion! O time! O barbarism!'

"'Ha! ha!' interrupts an astronomer, 'and shall I also have to expect a bad answer from you? For if, as I hear, you do not understand the first elements of algebra, God must have immediately communicated it to you if you have a better theory of the moon than I. Let us see what you know of it. You are silent? you laugh?'

"Make way! a pair of metaphysicians come to break a lance with my hero. 'Now,' cries one of them, 'you believe in monads?'—'Yes.'—'Do you not reject monads?'

calls the other.—'Yes.'—'What? you believe in them and you do not believe in them? Excellent!'"

"In vain," continues Lessing, "he would act like a peasant lad when his pastor asked, 'Can you say the seventh commandment?' Instead of answering, he took his hat, put it upon the point of his finger, made it whirl round very artistically, and said, 'Herr Pastor, can you do that?'"

This clever essay[1] would seem to indicate that for a time Lessing gave up the problem of philosophy as insoluble; indeed, the argument would lead to indifference to all knowledge that has not a direct influence on daily life. That he did not long remain of this way of thinking is certain. He always, indeed, believed that man cannot attain to absolute truth. "Father, give! pure truth is for Thee alone!" But he also believed that man has an uncontrollable impulse to seek for it; and that within the domain of relative truth he cannot be too curious, too earnest. Hence his almost passionate defence, in "The Education of the Human Race," of the discussion of ultimate problems. "The understanding must be exercised on spiritual subjects if it is to attain to its full enlightenment, and to produce that purification of the heart which makes us capable of loving virtue for its own sake." That he thought right action the only vitally essential element in religion, we have seen; but he gave utterance merely to a passing fancy when he asserted that man ought to concern himself with no more than right action.

The next philosophical paper takes us into a wholly different atmosphere. It is called "The Christianity of Reason." Mendelssohn received it from Lessing in 1754; and in a letter by Naumann, Lessing's friend, dated 1753, it is reproduced with almost literal accuracy. Although written thus early, it contains some essential principles to which Lessing ever afterwards clung. Here, instead of

1 Hettner asserts that "in contents and form it is one of the most beautiful things Lessing ever wrote;" but this is very extravagant praise.

assuming that "man was created for action, not for speculation," he pushes speculation to its uttermost verge, and talks confidently of subjects on which it is certainly not given to human beings to arrive at a fixed judgment.

If we consider the general view of the constitution of the world here set forth, it is undoubtedly Leibnitz rather than Spinoza to whom we must affiliate Lessing. Descartes and his school had sharply contrasted the two opposed worlds of matter and mind. Spinoza sought to effect a reconciliation by regarding mind and matter (thought and extension) as attributes of the one eternal Substance. Leibnitz, approaching the problem from another side, regarded the universe as composed of an infinite number of substances, or monads. These are not of a gross or material nature; they are metaphysical points, and the essence of each is that it possesses force. Like the strained bow, the monads are prepared, the instant opposition is removed, for the utmost activity of their nature. As forces their nature is to exclude all external influence. Each monad lives its own life, incapable of influencing or being influenced by others; so far as other monads are concerned, it is absolutely independent. The monads are all spiritual; that is, they have ideas. Ideas, according to Leibnitz, may be confused or indistinct, as when the parts of which an object is composed cannot be distinguished; obscure, as when the objects themselves cannot be distinguished. On the other hand, when it is possible to recognise the objects of ideas, the ideas are clear; they are plain or distinct when the parts of the objects are apprehended; they are adequate when not only the objects and their parts but their absolutely simple parts are known. Now, there are monads corresponding to all these different grades of ideas. The lowest are the monads composing the mineral world. In these, ideas are still slumbering, but in plants the ideas of the monads have become vital formative forces. Animals have ideas both confused and obscure, while the highest created monad known to us, the

mind of man, has both clear and distinct ideas and may even have adequate ideas. The primitive monad, God, has only adequate ideas. There is thus no gap in nature; we proceed by a regular progression from the lowest to the highest. And each monad, according to its measure, reflects the universe, so that by each, if we could but rightly interpret it, the whole scheme and history of things might be known. In God the universe is absolutely reflected; and from Him we may go downwards until we reach the dim reflection in the monads of the mineral world. No monad dies; and all are in incessant activity, giving to the energy with which they are endowed the largest possible scope.

To the question, how is it possible for mere metaphysical points to form extended bodies? Leibnitz replies that there is no such thing as extension. What we call extension or space is but the confused apprehension of the senses; and here he distinctly anticipated, although in a crude form, the later doctrine of Kant. Nevertheless, monads may be combined into aggregates. Such an aggregate is the human body, formed to be a fit dwelling-place for a monad of far higher rank than those of which the body itself is composed: the mind. But since monads are independent, and cannot act upon each other, how is the union of body and mind possible? It is here that the celebrated doctrine of the pre-established harmony comes in. Had the monads been created and left to act each for itself, there would have been not a Kosmos but anarchy; hence they were so arranged at creation that the movements and ideas which should take place among them would exactly fit into each other. The relations of mind and body form a signal instance of this pre-established harmony. According to the Cartesian doctrine, as developed by the immediate followers of Descartes, the movements of the body and the ideas of the mind are adapted to each other by constant intervention on the part of God. According to Spinoza, they are modes of the attributes of the one Substance

Leibnitz maintains that mind and body were originally wound up like two clocks, and that, without need of rectification, each invariably strikes in accord with the other.

In "The Christianity of Reason,"[1] Lessing reproduces with tolerable fidelity some of the main outlines of the system of Leibnitz as now stated. The world, he says, is composed of "simple beings"—that is, of monads. The composite is not directly created; it is but a consequence of creation. These simple beings are so arranged that they form "an infinite series of greater and less, which so follow one another that there is no gap among them." Every member of this series "contains all that the lower members contain, and something more; but this something more never reaches the last limits." Since the simple beings of the world are thus arranged, "there must be a harmony among them, from which everything is to be explained that happens among them—that is, in the world." And in the future this harmony will be perfectly comprehended in the domain of natural science, but not until the immediate explanation of all phenomena in nature has been obtained, so that "there will be nothing to do but to conduct them back to their true source."

Lessing breaks off in the midst of his exposition of the different grades of the simple beings; but so much he states—that the highest are "beings which have perfections; which are conscious of their perfections, and which have the power to act according to them." These are called "moral beings—that is, such as can follow a law." "This law is taken from their own nature, and can be nothing but this: act according to thy individual perfections!" "As in the series a gap cannot occur," the paper concludes, "beings must exist which are not clearly conscious of their perfections." Here we come to animals; and had he gone on, he would of course have advanced to the simple beings, or monads, which compose plants and minerals.

So far Lessing is in complete harmony with Leibnitz.

[1] S. S. xi. (2), p. 243.

The system is one which cannot now be accepted, for if there were no other objection to it, it implicitly assumes the existence of that space which it explicitly denies. The monads are inconceivable except in space; their relations are throughout spatial. Grant that they have extension, however, and they cease to be monads; we are driven back, to some extent, upon the theory of matter they were intended to displace.

Nevertheless, the theory is one of immense importance in the history of speculation. For the conception of inert matter it substituted once for all that of ever-active forces; it stimulated thought by suggesting a possible explanation of the mysterious union of mind and body; and by the doctrine that there is no gap in nature, it presented a dim anticipation of the theory of evolution, one of the essential principles of that theory being that species are not separated by impassable lines, but form an unbroken chain of which many links have now become invisible.

What is the relation between God and the monads of Leibnitz? This is by far the most difficult question in his philosophy; and it is one he never satisfactorily answers. At one time he seems to imply that God is merely the harmony which exists among the monads; but in his later expositions he speaks of God as the primitive monad of whom the created monads are fulgurations. The monads are, therefore, independent only in regard to each other; they are absolutely dependent on God. But they are dependent on Him only in the sense that He made and arranged them: they now exist and act without His direct intervention. He has, in fact, nothing more to do. In the act of creation He completed everything; and having caused Him to achieve this act, philosophy goes on her way without taking, or needing to take, farther heed of Him.

It is at this point that Lessing breaks away from Leibnitz—still more from Wolf and the "enlightened" philosophers—and approaches Spinoza. In "The Christianity

of Reason" he starts with the conception of God. As to the process by which he arrives at this conception—whether by intuition or by reasoning—we receive no hint; nor does he give us light upon this point in any of his writings. He simply assumes that God is, and that in our explanation of the universe we must advance from Him. And his God thinks. Here His resemblance to the God of the Deist ceases; and even in His thought He must not be confounded with an anthropomorphic Divinity. The thinking of the God of whom Lessing speaks is identical with creating. "To think, to will, to create, is with God the same thing."[1]

This is unquestionably a reminiscence of Spinoza. "Intellectus Dei ejusque potentia et voluntas, qua res creatas creavit, intellexit, et conservat sive amat, nullo modo inter se distinguuntur."[2] "Intellectus et voluntas Dei ab ipsius potentia et essentia, quæ existentiam involvit, non distinguuntur."[3] It is true Spinoza does not thus express himself in the "Ethics," the sole authoritative exposition of his doctrine in its mature form. There God is pure Substance; and thought and extension are His attributes. But the thought which Lessing ascribes to God is not human thought; it is altogether transcendental in its nature. He could, therefore, with perfect consistency say, as Jacobi declares he said, that "extension, motion, [human] thought are clearly grounded in a higher force which is far from being exhausted by them." That he defined God as "Force," not as "Substance," shows how profoundly he was influenced by the monadology of Leibnitz. The monads, as we have seen, were forces; and it was incomparably easier to associate them with a supreme Force than with a supreme Substance.

God, says Lessing, must have thought from all eternity that which is most perfect; hence He must from all eternity have thought His own perfections. Now, there are two ways in which He does this. Either He thinks

[1] S. S. xi. (2), p. 243. [2] Cogitata Metaphysica, ii. 8. [3] Ibid., ii. 10.

His perfections as a whole, or He thinks them in their parts, one separated from the other, each in its own grade. Here follows the deduction of the Trinity with which we have already become acquainted in "The Education of the Human Race," but worked out with greater fulness. From all eternity God thought His perfections as a whole. That is, since to think is with Him to create, He created from all eternity a being who lacks no perfection He Himself possesses. This being [which, it may be here repeated, must not be identified with Christ] is in Scripture called the Son of God; and the expression, Lessing says, is appropriate, because that which thinks a thing has a certain priority to the thing thought. The more two things have in common, the greater is the harmony existing between them. But God and his Son have everything in common. There is, therefore, absolute harmony between them; and this harmony may be identified with that which the Scripture calls the Holy Ghost, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. In this harmony is all that is in the Father, and all that is in the Son; it is, therefore, God. It could not, however, be God if the Father were not God and the Son were not God; and neither of these could be God if the harmony were not God. That is, all three are one.

Even in this process of reasoning Lessing may have been put upon the track by Spinoza, for in the "Tractatus de Deo" the latter speaks of God's only-begotten Son, the infinite intellect of God, in which He knows the essence of all things in an eternal and unchangeable manner: a doctrine which takes us back, through the *Νοῦς* of Plotinus, to the *Λόγος* of Philo. Augustine and many other theologians have presented a similar theory of the Trinity: sometimes as a substitute for the dogma of the three Persons in one Substance, sometimes as an accompanying dogma.

Descending from these barren heights, Lessing next comes to the relation of the God thus defined to the world. "God thought His perfections in parts; that is, He created

beings of which each one has something of His perfections: for, to repeat it once more, every thought is with God a creation. All these beings together are called the world."

We have seen that every member of the series of simple beings "contains all that the lower members contain, and something more; but this something more never reaches the last limits." He adds: "Such a series must be an infinite series, and in this sense the infinitude of the world is incontestable." This, of course, is implied in the statement that the world is God's perfections thought in parts, since God's perfections must be conceived as infinite.

In saying that "God thought His perfections in parts," Lessing might seem to intimate that He did so at a particular moment; and that, therefore, the creation was completed at a particular moment. But this cannot be his meaning, for he sets out with the assertion that God must have thought from all eternity that which is most perfect, and that hence He must from all eternity have thought His own perfections. The world, therefore, can no more have had a beginning than that Son of God which is God's perfections thought as a whole. Creation, in short, is not an act but a process. God has thought His perfections from all eternity; therefore He has been creating the world from all eternity. And He is creating it now. The monads, according to Lessing, do not, as Leibnitz thought, exist apart from God; He is not a Being with whom we may dispense when the monads have been set in action. They are simply His thought, the forms of His energy; they are in a certain sense identical with Him. Hence Lessing does not, with Leibnitz, speak of a "pre-established harmony." He speaks merely of "harmony." The harmony that exists among the simple beings of the universe is not a harmony imposed upon them from without; it is the inward harmony of the Divine nature; it is the essence of God Himself.

Many students of Lessing shrink from this interpretation, but his words will with difficulty bear any other con-

struction. And this meaning is confirmed by a little paper said by his brother to have been the sketch of part of a letter sent to Mendelssohn from Breslau. It is entitled, "Concerning the reality of things out of God."[1] "Explain to myself the reality of things out of God," he here says, "as I may, I must confess that I can form no idea of it. If it is called the complement of possibility, I ask, is there or is there not an idea in God of this complement of possibility? Who will maintain that there is not? If, however, there is an idea of it in Him, the thing itself is in Him, all things are real in Him. But, it will be said, the idea which God has of the reality of a thing does not destroy the reality of a thing out of Him. Does it not? Then reality out of Him must have something which distinguishes it from reality in His idea. That is: in reality out of Him there must be something of which God has no idea. An absurdity! But if there is nothing of this kind, if, in the idea which God has of the reality of a thing, all is contained that is to be found in this reality out of Him, then both realities are one, and everything said to exist out of God exists in God. Or let it be said: the reality of a thing is the sum of all possible limitations to which it may be exposed. Must not this sum be also in the idea of God? What limitation has the real thing out of Him, of which the ideal was not in God? Consequently this ideal is the thing itself; to say that the thing out of Him exists out of this ideal, is to double the ideal in a manner as unnecessary as absurd."

He believes, he says, that the philosophers, when they assert that a thing exists out of God, mean no more than that "the thing is different from God, and its reality is to be explained in another way than the necessary reality of God." "If, however," he continues, "they mean no more than this, why should we not say that the ideas which God has of real things are the real things themselves? The things are still sufficiently distinguished

[1] S. S. xi. (1), p. 133.

from God, and they become by no means *necessary* because they are real in Him. For must not an image correspond in His idea to the contingency they are said to have out of Him? And this image is simply their contingency itself. What is contingent out of God will also be contingent in God, or God must have no idea of the contingent out of Him. I use this 'out of Him' as it is commonly used, in order to show from the application that it should not be used."

The theologians, he knows, will exclaim, "Accept contingencies in the unchangeable nature of God!" "Well," he replies, "am I the only person who does this? You yourselves must ascribe to God ideas of contingent things; and has it not occurred to you that ideas of contingent things are contingent ideas?"

When Lessing says that although things cannot exist out of God, still they are "sufficiently distinguished from God," he cannot mean that they have independent existence. That would be a clear contradiction in terms. They are to be distinguished from Him only as a thought is to be distinguished from that which thinks. The world is God's thought; and there is a sense in which it may be said that God's thought is not Himself. It is the manifestation of Him.

In regard, then, to the ultimate question as to the relation of God to the world, there is no vital difference between Lessing's philosophy as he expressed it to Jacobi, and as he has left it to us in occasional fragments. He does not use the language of Spinoza's "Ethics;" and so far as extension is concerned, he could not have shared Spinoza's doctrine. The theory of monads, by making extension a mere result of confused apprehension, excludes it from among the attributes of God. But God is as far above the thought of man with Lessing as with Spinoza, and the latter does not more thoroughly identify the world with God than the former.

By thus going back to Spinoza, however, Lessing does not escape from all difficulty. He but escapes from one difficulty

to fall into another. For as we cannot help asking what use there is for God in the system of Leibnitz, so the question inevitably arises, what use is there for monads in the system of Lessing? If God thinks His perfections, and so creates, His activity accounts for everything: the phenomena of the world are the direct manifestations of His energy. The monads uselessly interpose themselves between Him and the ideas, perceptions, and movements of which they are considered to be the centres. Here Spinoza alone is completely logical.

IV.

Spinoza, again with perfect logic, treated the freedom of the will as a figment. In opposition to him, Leibnitz asserted the doctrine of liberty; but he clearly did so not in consequence, but in spite, of his general theory. If there is a pre-established harmony between the ideas of the mind and the movements of the body, both the former and the latter must equally follow a definite path laid down for them. This was at once pointed out by Bayle; and by no amount of subtle reasoning can the argument be overcome.

If the doctrine of Leibnitz logically leads to necessity, that of Lessing still more clearly does so. In his conversation with Jacobi he fearlessly accepted this result of his principles; and the only passage in his writings in which he formally raises the question is in perfect harmony with the statements Jacobi reports. This passage occurs among the notes to his edition of Jerusalem's "Philosophical Essays." "The third essay," he says, "shows how well the author understood a system which is decried because of its dangerous consequences, and which would certainly be far more generally accepted if people would accustom themselves to regard these consequences in the light in which they here appear. Virtue and vice thus explained; reward and punishment thus limited: what do we lose if

we are deprived of liberty? Something—if it is something—which we do not need; which we do not need either for our activity here, or for our blessedness hereafter: something the possession of which must make us far more restless and troubled than the feeling of its opposite can ever make us. The necessity according to which the idea of what is best produces its effect: how much more welcome is it to me than the bald power of acting under similar circumstances now in one way, now in another! I thank the Creator that I must will; that I must will the best. If, even within these limits, I still make so many slips, what would happen if I were left quite alone to myself?—left to a blind force which acts according to no law, and does not the less subject me to chance because this chance has its play in myself. From the standpoint of morality, then, this system is safe. But may not speculation raise quite different objections? And objections which can be disposed of only by a second system—a system strange to the common eye? It was this that often prolonged our conversations, and that cannot here be compressed into few words." [1]

"I thank the Creator that I must will; that I must will the best." The obvious meaning of this is that, when there is a choice between two courses, good and bad, a man of a certain character will inevitably choose the former. There is no accident in the matter. He acts as much in accordance with a law as the sun acts in accordance with a law in rising and setting.

The same truth is dramatically set forth in "Nathan the Wise." In the course of a conversation with Nathan, the Dervish incidentally says: "Indeed, if one must—." Nathan interrupts him: "Must, Dervish! Must? Nobody must *must* [nobody must say he is compelled], and a Dervish must? What must he do, then?"—"What any one rightly asks of him, and he acknowledges to be good: that a Dervish must do."—"By our God, you say truly!" [2]

[1] S. S. x. p. 8.

[2] S. S. ii. p. 200.

That is, a man must not act from external compulsion; but the internal compulsion by which he feels impelled to act rightly is the true glory of his nature.

But when a choice of two courses is open, it is only a man of a certain character who will choose the good; a man of a different character will as certainly choose the evil. Can it be said that the latter is free while the former is not so? This would be to reason on very loose principles. Clearly, the compulsion is in both cases similar; and this is involved in Lessing's argument.

The doctrine as thus stated is one confirmed by daily experience. It is true that we are often uncertain how a man will act in given circumstances; sometimes we cannot say with absolute confidence how we ourselves will act. But a chemist may be uncertain how a body will act in conditions in which he has not before observed it; and the reason is in both cases the same. The chemist is not sure that he correctly appreciates all the conditions; and we can rarely be absolutely sure that we perfectly know a human character. A man's nature is so complex, the impulses he inherits, the influences which have moulded him from youth upwards, are so many and various, that we may well doubt whether we fully understand either ourselves or those most intimately known to us. But in proportion to our knowledge of his character is the decision with which we foretell how any one will act. We feel no hesitation in saying that a certain person will not murder his enemy; that he will not escape from a difficulty by deception; that to save one whom he deeply loves he will sacrifice fortune and life. The reason is that there is nothing really arbitrary in human conduct. Men's actions follow each other in an order as definite as that which prevails in the physical universe; but it is an order of a much more complex and subtle nature, and therefore much more difficult to detect and define.

It is often said that so energetic a nature as Lessing's could not possibly have accepted the doctrine of necessity.

But, properly understood, this is the only doctrine adapted to an energetic nature. If we were uncertain whether or not fire would burn or water flow up a hill, all action would at once cease. It would be of no use to do anything if there were not order in the physical world. Order in the spiritual world is not less necessary. As children we start with will unformed; and it is the highest aim of moral education to give it a fixed direction towards good. It is because we know that certain impulses will lead to certain acts that we stimulate some and discourage others. And in obeying the best law we know, can we look forward to a greater reward than the deepening of our most precious sympathies and tendencies? We should not thank any one who told us that we had the power to rob or cheat; a good man does not possess this power, and he is very well content to be without it.

In disproof of the assertion that Lessing rejected free will, reference is often made to his paper entitled "Leibnitz on Eternal Punishments." Leibnitz, in nominally supporting the orthodox theory, pointed out that the punishment of sin is simply the consequences of sin; and that if, in the next world, a man goes on sinning, he must necessarily continue to be punished. Lessing supports this theory; but it no more implies the doctrine of free will than the fact that sin is punished in this life implies it. No one disputes that we are capable of sinning: that is, that if bad impulses are at any moment stronger within us than good, we shall give way to them. And, assuming that there is another world, the same law must clearly operate there. Lessing's assertion respecting the possible eternity of punishments is based, not on the doctrine of free will, but on the doctrine of necessity: on the doctrine that human beings, whether they like the fact or not, follow a certain order in their conduct. And on the same doctrine must be based the hope that the possibility of eternal punishments will not become a reality. If a man were always able to determine himself

indifferently in this way or that, even Divine pity might be baffled in the attempt to break his will. But if the operations of the human mind are regulated by law, those who look forward to a future life may reasonably believe that means will be discovered for overcoming the resistance of the most obstinate and depraved. We cannot assert that every motive of human nature has been appealed to here with the utmost strength; there may be in reserve some reward or punishment, some exhibition of anger or love, against which it will be impossible to hold out.

Lessing's belief that there is a law in human conduct, as well as in physical processes, was the ground of his conviction that there is also a law in human history. If we cannot to some extent foretell the action of the individual, we cannot at all foretell the course of the mass. But grant that there is order even in the apparently confused web of individual conduct, and the conclusion that there is order in the apparently still more confused web of human development is a necessary result. In the one case as in the other, we shall be able to predict the future precisely in proportion to our knowledge of the determining circumstances. The progress of the race involves so vast a sweep of thought that we shall probably never be able to advance beyond very general propositions respecting it; that Lessing detected progress at all, and formulated something approaching to a law of progress, is one of his greatest services to modern thought.

His idea of the divine element in the history of humanity may now be more easily understood than when we were treating directly of his "Education of the Human Race." All religious systems he regarded as the product of the ordinary faculties of men: faculties which in the case of the great founders of religions have worked with exceptional force and intensity. But these faculties are themselves elements of the divine thought. God acts directly in every mind; and the minds which have the

grandest conceptions, and are moved by the best impulses, are the minds in which His qualities are most displayed. Historical religions, therefore, may be truly called revelations; only, they are revelations evolved without miracle, in accordance with the laws which may be studied in the least, as in the most important, operations of the heart and intellect. In like manner we may speak of every great result achieved by man as a revelation. Plato, Shakespeare, Molière, Newton: such men as these open new and unsuspected aspects of existence; they raise their fellows to points of view from which the eye can sweep over wider ranges. And they do this because the divine energy is in them greater than in ordinary humanity. The whole of human development is thus, according to the philosophy of Lessing, a manifestation of God. It is one side of His thought: not, perhaps, the most important side, but that which is to us of deepest interest.

We have seen that in "The Education of the Human Race" he suggests the doctrine of the transmigration of souls. This was not a mere arbitrary guess loosely thrown out. It followed as a necessary consequence from his principle that each individual must go through all the stages of progress traversed by the race. Clearly no individual could do this in the course of a single life; nor could he do it in any other world but this. Each must, therefore, after death resume in a new form the experience he has partly undergone; and he must do so until the spiritual history of humanity has been reproduced in his individual career.

He resumes the subject in a fragment inappropriately entitled by his brother, "That there may be more than five senses for man."[1] The soul, he begins, is a simple being capable of an infinite number of ideas. As, however, it is a finite being, it is not capable of this infinite number of ideas at once, but attains them gradually in an infinite course of time. If it thus attains them, there must be an

[1] S. S. x. (2), p. 64.

order and measure in which they are attained. This order and measure are determined by the senses. Of such senses the soul has at present five; but if there is no gap in nature, it must have passed over all lower steps before it arrived at that it has now reached.

The soul is conscious only in association with matter; but it is not necessary that it should be associated with an organic body. Every atom of matter may serve to supply it with a single sense. "That is, the whole material world is animated." The atoms which are capable of supplying the soul with a particular sense must be homogeneous. Consequently if we knew how many homogeneous masses there are in the world we should know how many senses the soul may have. It must have every single sense in turn before it has any number of them in combination; so that the number cannot be infinite, otherwise the soul would never attain to more than one sense. After having gone through the series, it must have every possible combination of two senses, every possible combination of three, and so on. In that case, how vast has been the history of the soul before it has reached its present experience! How vast the future it has still to traverse!

In saying that the soul can be conscious only in association with matter, Lessing may seem to depart from the theory of monads. But by matter he merely means monads of a lower grade than the soul.

Even if the doctrine of transmigration were credible, it would not of course follow that Lessing's theory of the mode in which it is realised is correct. Moreover, he has nowhere attempted to prove the principle which induced him to adopt the doctrine. His theory of the progress of the race may be true, but what is there to indicate that each individual must, in his sense, pass through all the stages of that progress?

Although Lessing evidently occupied himself a good deal with this "system"—"the oldest of all philosophical systems," he calls it—it is noteworthy that among his

posthumous papers is a brief fragment in which he says that "fools, by anxiety about the future life, lose the present," and asks, "Why cannot we await a future life as calmly as a future day?" The whole tendency of progress, he points out, has been to lessen the curiosity of men regarding the future: hence the discredit into which astrology long ago fell. "The argument against astrology," he continues, "is an argument against all revealed religions. If it was true that there was an art which made us acquainted with the future, we should rather not know it. If it was also true that there was a religion which put us beyond doubt as to the next life, we should rather not listen to this religion." [1]

V.

Although the doctrine of monads and that of the pre-established harmony profoundly influenced European thought, the theory of Leibnitz which excited most popular attention—a theory which Shaftesbury had announced before him—was that the world is the best of possible worlds. It was caught up and re-echoed in all the advanced countries of the West; and not even the banter of Voltaire deprived it of its force.

Lessing never wavered in his adherence to this opinion. "God," he says in "The Christianity of Reason," "could think His perfections in parts in an infinite number of ways; there might, therefore, be an infinite number of worlds, if God did not always think what is most perfect, and if, therefore, among the possible worlds, He had not thought the most perfect, and thereby really made it." In the essay on "Eternal Punishments" he expresses regret that "the doctrine of the best world should be always called the doctrine of Leibnitz:" [2] meaning that no thoughtful man can accept any other. Several passages have been quoted from the "Dramaturgie" in which the theory is distinctly implied.[3]

[1] S. S. xi. (2), p. 252. [2] S. S. ix. p. 157. [3] See vol. ii. pp. 14, 37.

No one who even remotely understands Lessing's character will suppose that he was ignorant of, or indifferent to, the terrible facts of the world which seem inconsistent with the principle; few thinkers of his time had so clear an apprehension of the tremendous evils which tell against the peace of man. He did not live in a fool's paradise, or try to bathe the ugly and mean elements of existence in rosy hues; he looked the worst in the face, and, so far as he himself was personally concerned, did not consider life a prize to be highly valued. "At a time when I knew men only from books—happy he who never knows them more intimately!" "There have been philosophers who have considered life a penalty, but that death is a penalty could not, without revelation, have entered the thoughts of any man who merely exercised his reason." "It is truly a scurvy life!" "Was it not understanding, that they had to drag him into the world with iron tongs? that he so soon suspected the evil of it? Was it not understanding, that he seized the first opportunity to get away from it?" These are not the expressions of a man who, because he believes the world to be the best of possible worlds, imagines it necessarily brings happiness to the individual. There were, indeed, times when the iron seemed to enter into his very soul. A man of large sympathy and noble humanity, he nevertheless struck terror sometimes into the hearts of his friends by the inconceivable bitterness of his laugh. "Ah!" wrote Jacobi after visiting him, "after such a laugh, our beloved Lessing cannot live long; we shall assuredly lose him soon." These, however, were but passing moods; and he was too strong, too great, to build upon passing moods a pessimist philosophy. Whatever he himself suffered, whatever he saw others suffer, he never allowed anything to shake the central conviction of his life.

His mode of reconciling the existence of evil with the theory of the best of possible worlds was the same as that adopted by Leibnitz. By the world he meant the whole

of existence; and it may very well happen, he believed, that the misfortune of the individual means the welfare of the universe. In addition to this idea, he had the consolation that the best of possible worlds is not one in which everything remains stationary. Its goodness for man consists, according to his view, in the fact that the race slowly but steadily advances, conquering nature by submission to her, and in the end making even folly, weakness, and crime the pathway to goodness, strength, and wisdom.

In looking upon the world as one deliberately selected from among an infinite number of possible worlds, Lessing undoubtedly approached the theory which attributes personality to God, since the idea of choice is essentially a human idea. To Spinoza there was but one possible world; and, strictly interpreted, the principles with which Lessing starts lead to the same result. Their logical issue is that the world is neither the best nor the worst of possible worlds; that in itself it is neither good nor bad. In this particular doctrine he must be supposed to have followed impulse rather than reason. There is an unquenchable longing in certain minds of a high type for some indication that not in vain is this great spectacle of human strife and agony; that there is a meaning in the ceaseless process of evolution; that there is some far-off joy in which perhaps we shall not participate, but which shall be worthy of the vast and mysterious discipline by which it has been prepared.[1]

[1] "On warm June mornings in green country lanes, with sweet pine-odours wafted in the breeze which sighs through the branches, and cloud-shadows flitting over far-off blue mountains, while little birds sing their love-songs, and golden-haired children weave garlands of wild roses; or when in the solemn twilight we listen to wondrous harmonies of Beethoven and Chopin, that stir the heart like voices from an unseen world; at such times one feels that the profoundest answer which science can give to our questionings is but a superficial answer after all. At these moments, when the world seems fullest of beauty, one feels most strongly that it is but the harbinger of something else—that the ceaseless play of phenomena is no mere sport of Titans, but an orderly scene, with its reason for existing, its

'One divine far-off event,
To which the whole creation moves.'"

FISKE'S "*Unseen World*," p. 56.

If Lessing shared this aspiration, it does not follow that he approved the search for final causes among the phenomena of the world. Here he unquestionably sided rather with Spinoza than with Leibnitz. Even assuming that we are justified in speaking of the universe as formed on a plan, the plan must be so far beyond our range that it is the highest presumption to seek to know what bearing upon it this or that fact may have. The fact is there; it is the result of a scientific order which we can investigate; and when we have found out that order, we must therewith be satisfied. It was quite in Lessing's manner to speak, as he did to Jacobi, of "our miserable way of acting from design," and to indicate his sympathy with Spinoza in refraining from representing it as "the highest method, and so putting thought in the highest place." He knew well the worth of human reason, but he also knew that we may do justice to its greatness without identifying it with the absolute truth of things.

CHAPTER XXX.

LESSING'S LAST DAYS.

I.

AFTER his wife's death Lessing found little in life that deeply stirred his interest. Only a good dose of the laudanum of literary and theological excitement, as he expressed himself in a letter to Eschenburg, helped him to bear his solitude and misery. The sole friend to whom he now wrote with perfect confidence, and whose sympathy stimulated and encouraged him, was Elise Reimarus, a woman endowed at once with high intellectual gifts and true feminine tenderness and tact. Her home in Hamburg was the centre for the most cultivated society of that city, and she had won the respect and love not only of Lessing, but of Jacobi, Mendelssohn, and many others of the most distinguished men of the day. She was sincerely attached to Lessing; and there are many indications in their correspondence that had their intimacy begun at an earlier period, and when fewer memories mingled with present experience, their friendship might have ultimately passed into a nearer relation.

The old difficulty, how to conquer the bare means of living, now recurred with more than its former urgency. Alarmed lest any one should think that he was depriving his step-children of their rights, he sacrificed the whole of his wife's small fortune. It was the need of obtaining money that first suggested to him the idea of writing "Nathan;" and before he began the work it was absolutely

necessary that he should borrow a sum that would enable him to spend some months in tolerable quiet. His brother succeeded in securing for him from a friendly Jew in Berlin a loan of three hundred thalers. Having obtained this, he was kept in continual distress by the question how on earth he would manage to pay it back. "God knows I have not forgotten you," he wrote to his sister in December, 1778,[1] "but have very often thought of you with distress. But if you knew in the midst of what care I have been since the death of my wife, and how miserably I have been compelled to live, you would certainly rather pity than reproach me." Notwithstanding his necessities, however, there were enclosed in this letter five louis-d'or, and it contained a promise of future help.

A few months before he had written to Elise Reimarus:[2] "I am left here all by myself. I have not a single friend in whom I can perfectly confide. I am daily overwhelmed by a hundred troubles. The single year I spent with a reasonable woman I must dearly pay for. Everything, everything I must sacrifice, in order not to expose myself to a suspicion which would be intolerable to me. How often could I almost regret that I wished to be as happy as other men! How often do I wish I might at once step back into my old isolated position, to be nothing, to wish for nothing, to do nothing, except what the present moment brings with it! See, my good friend, such is my real situation. Are you, therefore, in these circumstances, right in advising me, simply that I may not gratify a pitiful enemy, to continue in a position that long ago became a burden to me? Ah, if he knew, this pitiful enemy, how far more unhappy I am (although I make a joke of him here!). But I am too proud to think myself unhappy; I gnash my teeth, and let the boat go as wind and tide may drive it. Enough if I myself do not overturn it!"

The "pitiful enemy" here alluded to was Goeze, who

[1] Sämmtliche Schriften, xii. p. 625. [2] S. S. xii. p. 611.

would, of course, have rejoiced had Lessing been obliged to leave Wolfenbüttel. His wish would probably have been gratified if he had chosen to continue the controversy, for, as we have seen, Lessing was resolved, notwithstanding the commands of the Brunswick Government, to respond to every charge of his enemy, and this would have made the resignation of his office almost necessary.

Although Lessing had on his side all friends of true culture, the multitude was with his opponent, and he had to endure a heavy penalty for attempting to make men reflect on the bases of their most important beliefs. Many friends were estranged from him, and the uneducated mass came to think of him with a shudder as the arch-enemy of religion. A rumour was spread abroad that he had been induced by the Jews, by a bribe of a thousand ducats, to publish the "Fragments:" a report which he deemed important enough to demand a formal denial. The denial came nominally from his eldest stepson, and appeared in a periodical at Prague. After his death, Gleim wrote in distress to Eschenburg asking whether it was true, as he had been told by a young Brunswick merchant, that Lessing "had been hated by all men, high and low, learned and unlearned, and could not safely walk in the streets?" Gleim's informant had even declared that it was quite possible Lessing had been murdered, "for many of his enemies had wished that one would make away with the monster."[1] This was wild exaggeration, as Eschenburg assured Gleim; but there can be no doubt that the *odium theologicum* embittered Lessing's last years. It was a popular belief, as an organ of pious opinion announced to its readers, that at his death the devil came and carried him away like a second Faust.

As if his pecuniary embarrassments and the troubles brought upon him by his intellectual freedom were not enough, the state of his health became a source of anxiety to himself and his friends. His eyes were so weak that

[1] Zur Erinnerung an G. E. Lessing, p. 160.

he sometimes feared he would become blind, and a strange inclination to sleep often overpowered him. Even at table, in the midst of animated talk, he would sometimes fall asleep, awaking with a start, usually with the words, "Well, what is it?"

In September, 1778, he went to Hamburg to arrange some business connected with his step-children, who continued to live with him. He was accompanied by Amalia, and as she became dangerously ill, the visit, which he had intended to last only for a few days, was prolonged till the middle of October. He was much refreshed both in mind and body by this visit. "My inclination for sleep," he wrote to Elise Reimarus some time after his return,[1] "is quite gone, and I shall be fortunate if you do not detect any of it by-and-by in my 'Nathan!'"

While writing "Nathan" he rose regularly at five, interrupting his labour only to awake the young people after some hours of steady work. He must have succeeded, while in his room, in altogether abstracting his mind from the worries of his ordinary life, for in none of his writings is there so calm a tone: as if the poet were complete master of himself and his theme. Yet towards the close his work all but suffered shipwreck. Semler, although he himself had done more than any other Lutheran theologian of his time to shake belief in the traditional Protestant creed, was alarmed at the excitement caused by the "Fragments," and by the controversy carried on by Lessing, and wrote a reply to the "Anonymous Writer." Lessing would have accepted this quietly, but there was a little appendix which surpassed in bitterness anything that had been written even by Goeze himself. Taking as his text Lessing's statement that "if a fire is to be put out it must have air," he related the story of "Sir John Bowling," who, seeing a light on the floor of a house in open day, set fire to the dwelling because he feared that during the night it might be burned down. For this wise act Sir John was

[1] S. S. xii. p. 622.

brought before the Lord Mayor of London. "My lord," said the secretary, "let the man be judged according to the laws; he is guilty." "No, I shall not do that," replied the Lord Mayor, "he is not really a villain, he is only not right in the head. Take him to Bedlam!" "Me to Bedlam?" Sir John exclaimed. "Yes, sir, that is the proper place for you." "And," concluded this delicate witticism, "he was taken to Bedlam, as every one knows, and is there till this day."

One is almost sorry that Lessing should have thought this worthy of more than a passing expression of contempt. He was, however, keenly stung by it. For some time afterwards he did not write to Elise Reimarus, and when at last he did answer her previous letter, this is how he expressed himself:[1]—"The scamp Semler is solely to blame. I received his vile stuff while I had still the whole of the fifth act of 'Nathan' to finish, and was so embittered at the impertinent goose of a professor that I lost all the good-humour which is so necessary to me in verse-making, and was in danger of forgetting 'Nathan' altogether. You may thank God that I did not write to you at the time! I should have written to you that it would be impossible to remain longer behind the mountain. If it were only to put such a donkey to shame!—assuming that a donkey is capable of shame! I might still be in favour of doing this if I thought you would also be so. Meanwhile, however, I shall serve him out in another way, and write to him from Bedlam such a little letter that he shall think of me!"

He began his "little letter," but, fortunately for Semler, did not find time to advance beyond the two following sentences:—"It has pleased you to conclude and crown your otherwise quite serious reply to the Wolfenbüttel Fragment on the aims of Jesus and his disciples, with a comically thorough and thoroughly comic after-piece in which I have the honour to be banished to a madhouse.

[1] S. S. xii. p. 638.

I am too well acquainted, Herr Doctor, with the great madhouse in which we all live, to be particularly pained if the madmen of the larger number should wish to shut me up in a madhouse of my own." [1]

In the summer of 1779, after "Nathan the Wise" had appeared, Lessing was so unwell as often to be confined to his room; and in February, 1780, he wrote to his brother:[2]—"This winter is a very sad one for me. I fall from one illness into another, none of which are deadly, but they prevent all use of my mental faculties. The last illness, from which I have just recovered, was dangerous enough, for it was a sore throat which passed into quinsy, and they tell me I am fortunate in having escaped from it. Well, yes! if it be fortunate to be able merely to vegetate!"

In the meantime his step-daughter, Amalia König, now a girl of about nineteen, and of a happy, lively disposition, had endeared herself to him, and made him feel once more that his house was a true home. It excited surprise that she had not been sent to live with some of her relatives; and certain busybodies, who apparently assumed that the man who had issued the "Fragments" was not to be judged by ordinary laws, got up a story that he was deeply in love with the young lady. This reached the ears of Elise Reimarus, who thought it her duty to let Lessing know what she had heard. There is something touching in his reply, which is dated May 7, 1780.[3] He assures his friend that if any of Amalia's relatives wished her to go to them he would not stand in the way. "But," he continues, "she shall not with my will make proposals to any of them; and I shall certainly not be the man to compel her to throw herself into the arms of strange people, or to take refuge in a country whither her mother for very good reasons was so unwilling to return. Any one who wishes to call my inclination for her, love, may use his

[1] S. S. xi. (2), p. 164. [2] S. S. xii. p. 649.
[3] Briefwechsel, &c., p. 511.

words as he will! It is, indeed, really love, and I gladly confess that the girl returns this love in every way I could wish. So far as I remember, my best friend, I have already, without being asked, confessed to you that it is her domestic virtues alone that make tolerable to me the life I am unfortunately obliged to continue. I might add, if I had not already done so, that I tremble to think of the hour which will take her from me, although I shall not postpone it for my own sake by a single moment. I shall fall back into a fearful solitude which I shall find it difficult to bear so well as formerly; to escape from which I might perhaps be induced to end my life as I began it, as a vagrant, and a far worse vagrant than before, since love of study would not now detain me so long in one place as it did in my youth."

II.

Notwithstanding all his cares and anxieties, we have some pleasant glimpses of Lessing in these last years. An incident which caused considerable amusement to his friends places in a charming light his geniality and goodness.[1] One day in 1779 he was called to the door to see a person who wished to speak with him. He found a man with marks of want upon his face, and accompanied by a large, dirty dog. In answer to the question who he was, the stranger said, "I am a philosopher!" Well, what was the philosopher's business? "I work," he replied, drawing from his bosom a dirty manuscript, "at a writing on the higher destiny of man, but I have neither shelter nor bread. Give me a room in your house and necessary food, and I shall here complete my book." Lessing was attracted by the eccentricity of the man, and not only took him in, but for five months treated him as one of the family. His name was Könemann; he was a native of Livland, and had been in Russia searching in vain for the position of a tutor. Lessing looked through his book, and good-naturedly

[1] Guhrauer, "Beilagen zum 3. bis 5. Buche," p. 43.

pointed out that it was not always grammatical. "That I know," replied the philosopher (as he was always called), "but I can intimate in the preface that I do not understand these things!" His dog was never from his side, and, especially at meals, was extremely troublesome. Somebody once said to Lessing that it was possible to put up with the philosopher, but that his dog was intolerable. "The dog," Lessing answered, "is an ornament of the philosopher; for he found it in his wanderings faint and starving. He had two rolls in his pocket, and gave one to the dog, which ate it greedily; and from that moment it has never left its benefactor. The two rolls were all the poor wanderer had at the time to keep himself alive. He shared them honourably, and as long as I have a roll left the philosopher shall have half of it." In spring, however, the longing to be out again in the world overcame this child of nature, and one day he suddenly said to Lessing, "To-morrow early I shall be off!" Lessing quietly gave him some money; and next morning, before the family rose, he and his dog disappeared.

A Jew called Daveson, who was unfortunate enough to excite the displeasure of the Duke of Brunswick—whom we have hitherto known as the Hereditary Prince—was, as Lessing believed, unjustly thrown into prison.[1] Lessing, indifferent what the Duke might think of his conduct, visited the man in gaol, and after his release took him to his house in Wolfenbüttel that his health might be recruited, ultimately sending him on to Berlin with a note of introduction to Mendelssohn. It was by such deeds as these that Lessing won his way to the hearts of all who could appreciate greatness of soul. Misery was always a passport to his goodwill. Even the enemies whom he so mercilessly brought low were safe from his attacks when they were unhappy; and if all men cried out against them, he instantly became silent. The poor of Wolfenbüttel never had a better friend. When he hardly

[1] Guhrauer (2), p. 330.

knew how he was to obtain the means of going on from day to day, he willingly helped those who had still less of the world's luck than himself.

He would not allow men to trench upon rights which he highly valued; but never did any one more liberally interpret the rights of others. A friend one day met him in the street in Brunswick, and announced in a tone of delight that he had fallen upon extraordinary good fortune. For a trifle he had obtained a number of antique cameos; and knowing Lessing's interest in such things, he put them into his hands. Lessing at once recognised them as the cameos which he had received from the Cardinal Duca di Nemi Braschi in Rome. A little inquiry made it clear that his servant—to the last Lessing's servants took advantage of his good humour—had stolen them. His friend of course insisted that he should take them back; but Lessing would not consent. "Keep the stones," he said: "I received them only as a gift; you bought them."

He went so often to Brunswick after his wife's death that he hired rooms in the Ægidean market-place: a pleasant, old-fashioned square, with a fountain in one corner of it. Here, and at Rönckendorf's wine-cellar, a favourite haunt of the literary men of Brunswick, he would see his friends; he also often visited them at their houses. Of these friends Eschenburg had long been one of the most intimate, as may be gathered from the letters written to him at the time of Frau Lessing's death. "We must by all means," wrote Lessing to Ebert from Hamburg, when the latter introduced him, "make friends of the clever men who are growing up. Otherwise, instead of following in our footsteps, they may tread upon our heels." Eschenburg well returned Lessing's esteem, for he ultimately carefully edited several of his works, and was all his life an enthusiastic champion of his fame.

It has been mentioned that Lessing formed a high opinion of "Julius of Tarento," a tragedy which appeared

in 1776. The author was Leisewitz, a young man who even at school had learned to reverence Lessing's name. After he left school, he several times met the great author; but Lessing took comparatively little notice of him until he learned that Leisewitz had written the tragedy which had so much pleased him. True to his principle of seeking out and encouraging young talent, he ever afterwards treated Leisewitz with marked attention; and the latter responded with a truly beautiful, almost chivalrous, devotion. On the day after Lessing's death he wrote in his diary:[1] "The news struck me uncommonly; I long walked backward and forward in my room with the greatest emotion, could eat little at midday, and long feared to drink. For few men have I had such deep respect as for Lessing; I have been an apostle of his fame, would gladly have converted the whole world to my opinion, and often praised, especially in the last years, what I did not believe. His failings have often been imitated by small minds, but with him one could always see how they were connected with his great qualities. We do not admire him enough if we merely know what he was: we must know that he might have been everything, only that a human life was too narrow to allow him to develop all his talents."

In the diary from which this passage is taken, Lessing's name often occurs; and as it shows him to us in living intercourse with a circle of men whom he esteemed and who were well aware of his distinction, two or three extracts may here fitly find a place.[2]

"*Jan.* 14, 1779.—Dined with Lessing and Forster at Eschenburg's. After dinner played chess with Lessing.

"*May* 11.—In the afternoon I was at Eschenburg's, where I met Lessing, with whom I went to Angott's house, because 'Nathan' had arrived, in reading which I passed the greater part of the afternoon. It is worthy of

[1] Zur Erinnerung an G. E. Lessing, p. 141.
[2] Ibid., pp. 130–140.

Lessing, although it is less a drama than philosophy in dramatic form.

"*June* 9.—After dinner I was at Madame Hauss's, and afterwards sought Lessing in vain at Angott's, but found him at Eschenburg's. I spoke much with him about my Exchange business. He encouraged me very much in the matter.

"*August* 10.—After dinner I went to the Fair, where I found Lessing. We walked about a little, and afterwards went to my house, where Lessing drank coffee. *Paradoxa*, as usual, and the usual ones.

"*August* 20.—After dinner I walked to the Fair, where I met Lessing, and went with him to my house. We talked much, and he told me of a certain Könemann ["the philosopher"] who has come from Russia. He himself says that he has learned nothing but speculative philosophy. Lessing intends to keep him for a long time. From Lessing I went to Professor Schmid's, where I met Eschenburg, who had arrived from Hamburg; afterwards I saw Lessing and Tünzeln, who spoke with me in the street.

"*August* 21.—After dinner I went again to Lessing, who introduced me to Daveson, the latter having come with 'the philosopher.' Kuntsch was also there. I took pains to keep 'the philosopher' from becoming ridiculous.

"*September* 24.—To-day I had no real inclination to work, read a little in the *Lettres Juives*, at last was getting my hair dressed about ten, when Lessing came to me. He talked much, especially of Könemann. Lessing described him to me as a man who believes that nobody has had his crude ideas. He hates all States, and yet will enjoy all the advantages which the State gives; for example, he denounces all manufactures, and yet likes to wear a trimmed coat and a hat with feathers. The air was uncommonly pleasant, and we went out to Ebert's, where Jerusalem also came.

"*October* 28.—After dinner I was at Schmid's for a little, and hearing that Lessing was at Daveson's, I went there. We laughed, talked, and played piquet: I only two games. Lessing cannot forget that I once said to him it seemed to me that a man went about the world like a pig if he did not keep a diary.

"*March* 3, 1780.—I dined in my club at Rönckendorf's as Schwartzen's guest. We sat in the following order:—I, Lessing, Colonel Warnstedt, Vice-President Jerusalem, Chamberlain Kuntsch, Professor Ebert, Professor Zimmermann, Count Marschall, Upper Equerry Bothmer, Schwarz. We talked much of a monthly mid-day club which should be started immediately, and of a great club to be got up in winter."

This "great club," which still exists, was forthwith instituted; and Lessing was one of the earliest members.

"*July* 17, 1780.—To-day I rose very early, and ordered post-horses to go to Wolfenbüttel. . . . We drove on account of the postilion and the horses to the Golden Angel, and went, without entering the house, to Lessing, although not by the nearest way, so unfamiliar had Wolfenbüttel become to me. We found him having his hair dressed, and went shortly afterwards to the library. Langer was there, and afterwards came Assessor von Brocks, Kalm, and Schleitz, from Brunswick and from Hamburg. They all seemed to me rather dull; I, on the other hand, was in brilliant humour. Thär and Lessing went round the gallery; I could not go with him for giddiness, and remained sitting at the door. We again went to Lessing, and Langer soon afterwards came; we were for some time in the court and before the door—dined in the garden hall. The conversation was very pleasant. A *saillie* from Lessing, Langer, or me would fetch the others. After dinner coffee was drunk and tobacco smoked, partly in the garden, partly in the hall."

It is perhaps worth mentioning that the smoking must

have been confined to Lessing's guests. Like Goethe, he intensely disliked tobacco.

As Langer was Lessing's successor, it may be well to add the few lines in which Leisewitz records the impression produced upon him by the future librarian at this pleasant party:—

"They have given me a very unjust idea of this Langer. He is infinitely more than a dealer in editions, and possesses much thorough and interesting knowledge. Even Lessing appeared to me to have judged him too severely. He is a great connoisseur of what is ancient, and related with much pleasure how Robert [Horace] Walpole has built a house at Strawberry Hill altogether in the Gothic style. There is not a panel, not a chair, not a book in it younger than three hundred years. I myself have had similar ideas."

In August, 1780, Leisewitz was in Weimar, where he of course visited Herder and Goethe. Among many subjects, the former talked to him "especially of Lessing." Goethe also spoke of Lessing "with the greatest respect, especially on account of his 'Nathan' and his theological controversies."

An entry, dated November 22, 1780, tells of a party which consisted of Lessing, Schmid, Kuntsch, and Leisewitz:—"We were in uncommonly good humour, joked, laughed, philosophised, talked sentiment, and united the two last things in a discussion about love. I maintained that in love properly so called everything depends upon physical needs; Lessing was of a different opinion."

III.

The visit of Jacobi in July, 1780, during which the famous conversations on philosophy took place, seems to have given Lessing much true pleasure. Some time afterwards, on his return journey, Jacobi again visited him, and the two went together for some days to Halberstadt,

where Gleim was delighted to welcome them. On the wall of Gleim's garden-house, on which were many inscriptions, Jacobi wrote a proverb; Lessing wrote his favourite *Ἓν καὶ πᾶν.*

At this time Amalia König had gone to see some of her relatives. A letter written to her from Brunswick on August 17, 1780, shows us the kind of relation in which Lessing stood to his wife's children:[1]—

"My Dear Daughter,—Your letter of the 4th I received, I assure you, only yesterday. I had, indeed, promised to write to you without waiting for your letters. But the Jacobis [Jacobi was accompanied by his sister] came shortly after your departure and carried me off with them to Halberstadt, where I spent some days not unpleasantly. Old Gleim would not be pacified because you had not come with us; and, indeed, it would have been better if you had limited yourself to this little journey, and not undertaken a great and long one for which you are not strong enough. Because I hoped you would be strong enough, and could not doubt that among the relatives whose acquaintance you wished to make you would be happy, I felt less scruple about not writing to you when we often thought of you. Forgive me if I have caused you unnecessary anxiety. This little journey has been exceptionally advantageous to me; and I should be eternally sorry if it caused your great one not to be advantageous to you. But I have good courage, and hope that your brother will, by next mail, put me out of all anxiety. It is probably a little return of your old trouble; and I will hope that there is a skilful physician in Eschweiler, who at any rate does not make matters worse with his remedies. If you yourself can write, be sure you write to me! Fritz is well, except that he has had a great misfortune, which has cost him many tears, and made me nearly laugh. His red coat has been stolen from him, almost from his body.

[1] Briefwechsel, &c., p. 514.

Engelbert is also well, and has been at the Fair with the Cantor. To Theodor I wrote fourteen days ago, and daily expect an answer. Meanwhile, although everything is right with us, Fritz and I miss you very much, and beg you to return to us as soon as possible. Have no fear about my health, and try to recover your own on the return journey, during which I hope you will have less heat and dust. We embrace you together, and I remain, your faithful father, LESSING.

"*P.S.*—Madam Daveson, who wishes to be remembered to you, went to the Fair for us; and I hope you will find everything as you wish."

Lessing felt so well at this time, and was so hopeful of the future, that, notwithstanding all the theological writing to which he looked forward, he undertook to supply the Hamburg Theatre with two plays annually. The theatre was to have for six months the sole right of representing them, and in return for each he was to receive fifty louis-d'or.

Perhaps in connection with this undertaking, he visited Hamburg in October, 1780: his last visit, as it proved, to his favourite city. In a letter written to Amalia soon after his arrival, he tells her he already longs to be back; but another letter to her, a week afterwards, shows him in excellent spirits.[1] Her uncle, who had been to Wolfenbüttel, had returned to Hamburg, healthy and happy; "but, dear Malgen, he did not bring a line from you for me. He could only tell me that you were well. See now, one may forget to write even when one knows address, and post-day, and all! It would, however, be too bad if I had to come back without receiving a syllable from you." He assures her that his health is admirable, and that he promises himself "a thoroughly good, diligent winter." "I will bring with me for you," he

[1] Briefwechsel, &c., p. 518.

adds, "a gray beaver hat, such as they wear here now. I hope it will fit you, but I can only take the measure from my own head."

A letter from Elise Reimarus to Nicolai gives the same impression: "Lessing is here now, and whether it is that intercourse with living friends suits him better than intercourse with the dead, or even than fighting with his enemies, he is almost the Lessing of old times. What that is, I do not need to explain to you."

The first letter Elise received from him, however, after he was back in Wolfenbüttel, must have convinced her that his health was utterly broken.[1] "In proportion to the speed with which I hastened home is the unhappiness with which I have arrived. For the first thing I found was myself. And with this displeasure at myself, shall I begin to be healthy and to work? 'Certainly,' I hear my friends call to me, 'for a man like you can do what he wishes.' But, dear friends, let that be rather differently put, as: 'can do what he can.' And whether I shall ever again feel this 'can,' that, that is the question! But what succeeds that is not tried? Well, my dear friend, since you also advise it, so be it. I shall tell you every week how I am, and if I do that, I am already half helped, am I not? Meanwhile, give my best regards to all yours and to the whole Campe family. Who would not wish to remain in such society? Who would not wish to have here even a single member of it?"

A few weeks afterwards the Duke of Brunswick called Lessing to him, and announced that, according to his ambassador in Regensburg, the "Corpus Evangelicorum" was about to demand that he should punish the editor of "the scandalous Fragment on 'The Aims of Christ and his Disciples.'" "The Duke," Lessing wrote to Elise Reimarus,[2] "told me this in so friendly and reassuring a manner, that I am almost sorry I answered him with such indifference and confidence. At least I might have refrained from

[1] S. S. xii. p. 657. [2] S. S. xii. p. 662.

expressly begging him to act in everything without the least reference to me, as he believed it was the duty of a State of the Empire to act. For I perceive that no one who wishes to be of service to us deserves such an expression. At the same time, my surly indifference was not due to the cause to which you attribute it. You think, I know, that I should like above all things to be persecuted, and imagine that nothing is more annoying to me than that I should be let alone. But, my love, how far you are from knowing me if you seriously think thus of me! It may be that what happened to the bastard of a great lord sometimes occurs to me. He would not say who he was, and allowed himself, although innocent, to be hanged, simply that his judge might incur a heavy responsibility towards his father. At heart I may console myself with the thought that in the end some one will come and exclaim to the judge: 'Judge, are you the devil's, that you will cause the bastard of our gracious lord to be hanged?' Do I not know of what great lord I am the dear bastard? Come, therefore, quick with the ladder! And let no one fear that terror shall make me let out the secret!"

The alarm proved false. Whether or not it suspected whose bastard he was, the "Corpus Evangelicorum" decided that it was better to reserve its amenities for offenders of a less troublesome class.

His health became worse and worse, and towards the end of 1780 his whole physical nature seemed to undergo a marked change. He suffered severely from asthma; he whose step had once been so firm could only drag himself heavily along; his clear voice lost its strength, the fire of his eyes was extinguished. His Brunswick friends saw him but seldom, and when he came among them they missed the old strength of argument and brilliance of repartee. After his death it was discovered that he had been suffering from ossification of the arteries. It was not, therefore, strange that he had a presentiment he would soon die. "My turn comes next," he said sadly, on returning

one day from a funeral. "Ah, dear friend," he wrote in the letter of introduction, dated December 19, 1780,[1] which Daveson carried to Mendelssohn, "the play is played out! Gladly should I speak with you, however, once more."

It is pathetic to see from this letter—the last he wrote to the friend of his youth, with whom were associated so many memories—how this great and independent spirit longed for a word of sympathy and encouragement. "Truly, dear friend, I sorely need a little letter from time to time, if I am not altogether to lose heart. I do not think you know me as a man who has a burning hunger for praise. But the coldness with which the world is accustomed to show certain people that they do nothing right for it is, if not deadly, benumbing. That much of what I have recently written does not please you is not surprising. Nothing ought to have pleased you, because for you nothing was written. At most, the remembrance of other and better days may here and there have caused a momentary illusion. Even I was then a healthy, slim sapling; now I am a rotten, gnarled trunk!"

On February 3, 1781, Lessing spent the evening in society in Brunswick.[2] He suffered from a severe attack of asthma, and on returning to his rooms in the Ægidien market-place, could not speak; he would not, however, allow his servant to go for a doctor. He passed a restless night; nevertheless, a friend who called next morning found that he was preparing to start for Wolfenbüttel. The friend persuaded him to change his mind; and soon afterwards, a doctor having meanwhile been brought, he began to vomit blood. A message was sent to Amalia König, who hastened in deep distress to wait upon the man who had been to her so kind a father, so true a friend.

[1] S. S. xii. p. 606.

[2] The circumstances of Lessing's death are known partly from a letter by Leisewitz to Lichtenberg, partly from descriptions given long afterwards by his step-daughter.

He himself felt that the hand of death was upon him; but his state varied from day to day, and often he was out of bed for a considerable time. He was able to receive the visits of his friends, and talked to them with much of his old liveliness. To one of them, who told him of the persecution of Voltaire on his deathbed by the Abbé Gaultier and the Curé of Saint Sulpice, he is said to have exclaimed, "When you see me about to die, call the notary: I will declare before him that I die in none of the prevailing religions."

On the 15th of February he seemed particularly well, and joked with some of those who came to visit him. But already he had passed into the dark shadow. In the evening several friends came, and remained in the anteroom; and their presence was announced to him as he lay quietly in bed. Suddenly, to their astonishment, the door between the two rooms opened, and Lessing entered, the cold sweat of death upon his brow, a strange pallor upon his noble features. Amalia had been sitting at the door, that he might not see her tears. Silently, with a glance of inexpressible tenderness, he pressed her hand; he then bowed to his assembled friends, and with a painful effort removed his cap from his head. He had far exceeded his strength; his limbs sank under him, and he was carried back to bed. A stroke of apoplexy followed, and—after life's fitful fever he slept well.

IV.

Thus ended, at the age of fifty-two, Lessing's great career. He died so poor that the Duke of Brunswick had to pay the expenses of his funeral. He was buried in the churchyard of St. Magnus's Church, about a mile from Brunswick, and so little heed was given to his grave, that at a later time the spot where he lies was found only after diligent search. It is covered by a stone bearing his name; and beside this is a simple monument raised in our day to his memory by

the actors of Brunswick. In a beautiful clear space, within a few hundred yards of the house in which he died, there is a bronze statue of him, one of Rietschel's masterpieces, set up in 1853 in token of the gratitude of the nation for his services. With head erect, and looking forward with free, bold, and open glance, he stands there, the type of manly strength, lofty independence, and unaffected greatness.

Lessing's was not, on the whole, a happy life. Compelled to work hard for daily bread, he had to devote much of his best energy to uncongenial labour; and, with a passionate love for the society of his fellows, he found himself more and more, as years went on, passing beyond the range of their sympathies. None of his friends understood him. In the heights to which he raised himself the air was too fine, too keen, for ordinary men; loneliness was the penalty he had to suffer for genius.

The debt Germany owes him is immense. On the year of his death Schiller published his first drama, and Kant issued his "Critique of Pure Reason." Soon afterwards Goethe returned to the career he seemed to have abandoned, and by-and-by Fichte began to impress his countrymen by the power of his splendid personality. Thus Germany passed into the midst of that classical period in her literature to which she looks back with pride and longing. Thoroughly awake, she exercised her energies in all directions, and, while beaten and humiliated in the world of politics, took for a time the acknowledged lead in the greater world of thought.

But for Lessing this classical period would have been impossible. By his dramas, his incessant criticism, his controversies in literature, art, and theology, he awakened in the national mind a spirit of genuine freedom, an impatience of commonplace, a thirst for intellectual achievement of enduring excellence. He cleared and ploughed the soil on which his successors cast their fruitful seeds.

For the charm that belongs to quiet and resigned minds

we must not look in Lessing. There never existed a more restless, ardent spirit. Nor will he please those whose ideal of a man is one who retires from contact with the world into the solitude of his own thoughts. He was essentially a man amongst men; he found in society his highest happiness, his chief stimulus; it was the steel that struck from the flint its most brilliant sparks. And in his vast labours it was society—the society of his own time—which he kept always before him as that to whose needs he was bound to minister. Even in questions that seemed remote from his age he detected points of contact with the impulses of the living present.

Nobody can fail to see that in one aspect of his activity he was a powerful revolutionary force. He may be said to have spent his life in assailing what he considered error. Far from avoiding struggle, he courted it, delighted in it, felt most free and buoyant in seeking out and destroying intellectual foes. "No head was safe from him," says Heine. "Many a skull he struck off from pure wantonness, and then was mischievous enough to hold it up to the public to show that it was empty."[1] He was the born enemy of shallowness, pretence, and intolerance; and if an opinion was false or injurious, it was not protected by being old, or popular, or supported by high authority. He had but one question respecting it: is it true? If not, he turned against it the whole might of his logic and wit.

Could no more than this be said respecting him, he would not be essentially distinguished from the most characteristic thinkers of the eighteenth century; we should have to identify his influence in the main with that of Voltaire, whom he took so much pleasure in opposing. But to assert that he was a revolutionary force is to disclose only half the truth; the other and more important half is that in destroying he incessantly strove to build up. His negative conclusions were always accompanied by positive results. In regard to art, poetry, and the drama, he set forth a body

[1] "Ueber Deutschland," part i. p. 168 (Volksausgabe).

of principles which are still the subject of inquiry and debate; and in regard to religion, while stripping off its accidents, he brought into distinct light its living essence. Even when he had attained these objects, he did not consider his task as a critic at an end. In his view, the function of criticism is not only to analyse and generalise, but to conduct men to the products in which its truths have been embodied. In displacing the French drama he led his countrymen to Shakespeare and the Greek tragic poets; for criticism itself he turned them away from the "criticasters" of the hour to Aristotle; in philosophy he passed over Wolf and the men of the "enlightenment" for Spinoza and Leibnitz. Thus treated, criticism is not a hard measure for the discouragement of genius, but a bright star for its guidance. Nor does it diminish delight in high work: it purges and quickens the perception of beauty, and imparts to the enjoyment of it increased strength and freshness.

Here we are at the true source of Lessing's greatness; for these two tendencies—the tendency towards revolution, the tendency towards reconstruction—are the deepest impulses of the modern world. In no single man were they ever more harmoniously combined. And they were combined in association with an intellect of splendid strength and flexibility: an intellect that worked under the control of the two noblest passions of our nature, a love of truth for its own sake, and an undying love of man.

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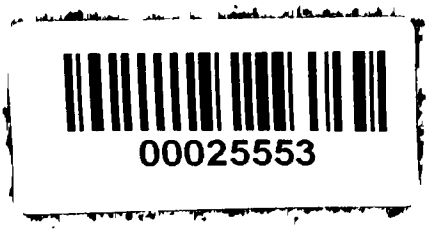
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